

Tribute to Professor Geoff Smith, 1941-2021

By Mary Louise Adams, May 2021 Faculty Board

Geoff Smith came to Queen's in 1969 to teach American History. He worked in the Department of History for 31 years before moving, in the fall of 2000, to what was then the School of Physical and Health Education. Geoff was a historian of US foreign policy. His book *To Save a Nation* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. He was a long-time president of the Peace History Society. Geoff also loved sports, coached the Queen's men's basketball team, and taught a course on the history of sport – great preparation for his move to Phys Ed, which was both a bit of a coup and a wild blessing for our School. Geoff retired from Queen's in 2006.

Since Geoff died two weeks ago, dozens and dozens of tributes have appeared on Facebook, posted by Queen's alumni, talking of Geoff as a “favourite teacher,” a terrific basketball coach, “the best prof at Queen's,” and someone who made a huge impact on students academically and personally. Many of the writers mention the influence Geoff had on their careers and ways of viewing the world. I have been especially struck by how many of them have said they try to reflect Geoff in their own work as teachers. I think he would be really proud of this legacy. Geoff's own exceptional teaching skills were recognized by the Frank Knox Award and several departmental teaching awards in Phys Ed. Both *The Journal* and, I believe, *Maclean's* magazine called him the best professor at Queen's.

It's hard to resist taking the time available to me here to use Geoff's example as a critique of some of the things we see happening around us today at Queen's and other universities. I am certain Geoff would want me to do so. His approach to teaching was the antithesis of what would

today be called best practice. He was totally old school. No technology. No learning objectives. No rubrics. He was known to play golf in the classroom, to teach in costume, to leap onto tables, and to bring his beautiful yellow dogs to class.

Geoff lectured: big lectures, full of wide sweeping ideas presented in full paragraphs with a narrative arc and no slides or itemized take-aways. People who were not registered in his courses would show up just to hear him. Geoff helped students to challenge their own beliefs and to question the status quo. He encouraged them to dissent. He did not believe in hand-holding. He had high expectations, wanting students to think hard and write well. He saw students as full of potential. The theatre in his teaching – and there was a lot of it – was designed to provoke, to shake things up, to make it impossible for students to be passive in relation to their own learning or to the structural harms that proliferate around them. Geoff refused the reduction of education to job preparation. He understood from experience how education could bring meaning to a life and could help prepare students to live bigger lives and see and understand their connections with others.

I've been thinking a lot about the different kinds of contributions Geoff made to the university. He pushed for better ways of doing things – and against the introduction of ways that were worse. He was a voice at student demonstrations and a thorn in the side of a constantly growing administration. (As someone told me after I spoke at his memorial the other day – there used to only be 2 VPs at Queen's). Geoff was a public connection between town and gown. He brought his wit and his intellect to regular columns in the *Whig Standard*. He was a prolific writer of letters to the *Globe and Mail*. He offered unwavering support to Queen's basketball teams and took delight in attending and contributing to all manner of campus events. Geoff showed up. He paid attention. He instigated!

Geoff was a student-oriented, community-minded, activist Queen's professor. He was a fabulous colleague who pulled his weight and made it easier for his colleagues to pull theirs. For generations of students, staff, and faculty, Geoff was legendary for the way he made Queen's better. And yet – there is not these days much support at Queen's (or any university) for professors like Geoff, who decline to use their talents – and Geoff's were prodigious – simply to turn the hamster wheel of scholarly production or to work to the requirements of impact-metrics. One can just imagine how a discussion would go today about his merit score! Geoff complained strongly about the corporatization of the university, and I have been wondering this week what he would make of the betrayal of public trust we have seen unfolding around our colleagues at Laurentian.

Geoff taught his last class in 2008. The room was full. He was chuffed. As he brought his lecture to a close, he looked out at his audience. Big dramatic pause. These were going to be the last words of the famous professor! We all waited.

“Take care of each other. Everything in moderation. Don't forget to floss!”

That was Geoff. Queen's was beyond lucky to have him.