

IN MEMORIAM

DAVID CHARLES WHITNEY

David Charles “Chuck” Whitney was born August 19, 1946. At the time of his death in Evanston, Illinois, on February 10, 2019, he was Emeritus Professor of communication studies in the Northwestern University School of Communication, where he had served as Associate Dean for Faculty and Graduate Affairs, including a period at the School’s campus in Qatar. He is remembered at The University of Texas at Austin as a valued faculty member—a full professor in the School of Journalism. A number of colleagues were able to share their reflections at the memorials held at Northwestern and at the May 2019 meeting of the International Communication Association. The quoted comments below are drawn from those events.

As the son of a Professor at Clemson University in South Carolina, which he attended as an undergraduate, Chuck was born to the academy. After a variety of positions in professional journalism, he earned his Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota in 1978, one of the top programs in journalism and mass communication at that time.

In Chuck’s long career in research, he focused on media sociology, including early studies of mass communication gatekeepers, at a time when the focus of the field was on media effects. These contributions subsequently grew into major research areas in the expanding communication field. In addition to contributing a substantial body of original empirical projects, he shaped the field by helping edit a number of influential volumes, including reviews of mass communication research, the first *Encyclopedia of Journalism* (Sage 2009), and text books on media and popular culture. Major research projects during his time at UT Austin included reports for the National Television Violence Study, for which he was one of the key investigators. He was editor of one

of the field's major journals, *Critical Studies in Mass (now Media) Communication*, and on the editorial board of many others. These efforts all speak to his multi-perspectival approach to the field in which he was highly conversant with both the critical and the more traditional social science wings.

He was also a well-regarded academic leader and program builder, serving as President of the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research and in several key roles in the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

In recalling Chuck's many contributions, numerous former graduate students spoke especially of his mentoring, which was made more effective by his diverse intellectual interests. Matt McAllister, now a communications Professor at The Pennsylvania State University, was one of Chuck's advisees at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. As he recalled,

One thing we all could tell about Chuck—and liked him instantly for—was that he was a unique mix of (1) eclectic intellectual expertise; (2) having a strong BS detector that no doubt came from, or at least flowed with, the journalist in him; and (3) was a sweet, kind-hearted, empathetic soul. It was exactly what I needed for a Ph.D. advisor. Years later, several of his former advisees nominated him for the International Communication Association's Aubrey Fisher Mentorship Award. He didn't receive it (it's very competitive), but we sent him the nomination packet afterwards so he could read all of the wonderful things said about him from former advisees.

Professor McAllister recalls that his most affirming moment as a doctoral student resulted from Chuck's words:

As I was writing my dissertation, I had a vision of giving Chuck a completed and polished draft of the whole thing. I casually mentioned that to Chuck, and he said, "How far are you on it?" And I said, "Oh, I've completed the first three chapters." Chuck said, "Woah! Maybe I should take a look at what you've done so far." So I printed it out for him (no easy file sharing in those days), and after a couple of weeks he invited me to lunch to talk about it. I was nervous—I had known a LOT of folks who never finished their dissertations. We met at a Mexican restaurant. He sat me down. He looked at me, and said matter-of-factly: "It's good." He paused and let that sink in. Believe me, he had many things for me to change. But that "It's good." It meant, "I'll finish." I'll never forget that good will, that affirmation, and will always be grateful.

Another former doctoral student at Illinois, Matt Ehrlich, who went on to become a faculty member there, recalls similar support:

During my four years of study with Chuck at Illinois, he was unfailingly encouraging and supportive. I learned from him that the professional practice of journalism could be fruitfully informed by critical media scholarship. Clearly, I would not have achieved whatever measure of professional success I have been able to attain without his early good counsel. I know many others have benefited from his mentorship as I have.

He was also highly regarded by the undergraduate students he mentored, including, at UT Austin, Stephanie Elizondo Griest, who went on to become an accomplished writer. She said,

He taught with so much rigor and panache, he would have been intimidating if he weren't so jolly. One afternoon, I knocked on his office door. Before I could introduce myself as his student, he said to sit on down, there was something he wanted to discuss. My future. He had plans. He nominated me for a scholarship that covered not only part of my tuition but also enabled me to take an unpaid internship at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. That summer was a watershed: first job, first byline, first business suit, first time I ventured out on the road alone. And Chuck's mentorship was just getting started. He went on to counsel me through every career decision I made for the next twenty years, writing countless letters of recommendation along the way. He was sitting on a platform on the stage when I received my diploma, and raced over to engulf me in a hug. We both left Austin soon after, but our paths kept crossing. He invited me to read at the University of California-Riverside during my first book tour and later visited me in Iowa City while I was working on my M.F.A. (For the first and only time in our relationship, he allowed me to treat him to dinner. It felt like one of the most adult things I had ever done.)

One of his most accomplished academic doctoral advisees at UT Austin, Zizi Papacharissi, is now Professor and Communication Department Head at the University of Illinois-Chicago. She says,

Even though he always said that Ph.D.'s are known for knowing a lot about a very small number of things, I think he was a man who seemed to know something about everything. Often that something was a lot, and substantial. I remember his office that was packed with stacks of paper everywhere. This is when he edited the journal. I felt like a kid in a playground, and because I had the habit of just running into the office and interrupting him, I would often kill time browsing through all the manuscripts.

While at Minnesota he met and married Ellen Wartella, also a student in that graduate program, currently Al-Thani Professor and Communication Studies Department Chair of the School of Communication at Northwestern, and for whom the Distinguished Research Award in the Moody College of Communication is named. Over the course of their long careers they were an academic “power couple” in the field of communication, well recognized both for their distinguished scholarly accomplishments and for the wide network of colleagues and junior scholars they mentored. Their first jobs were at Ohio State University; then they spent many years at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s Institute of Communication Research. Their path brought them to The University of Texas at Austin in 1993 when Ellen was appointed Dean of the then College of Communication.

They departed for the University of California at Riverside when Ellen was appointed Provost, with Chuck serving as Chair of the Department of Creative Writing. In 2010, they moved to Northwestern, where he remained until his retirement in 2017. Wherever they went, they together helped build a sense of community among their colleagues, particularly through memorable gatherings at their home. Northwestern School of Communication Dean Barbara O’Keefe writes,

I believe we first became acquainted at one of countless junior faculty potluck dinners that made our life in Urbana surprisingly pleasant. At that time, there was a wonderful community of young communication faculty spread across the university. We helped and supported each other, got to know everyone’s family, developed collaborations, and found ways to have fun together. It was a little village within the university, and Chuck and Ellen were central in bringing us all together.

As women increasingly take on major academic leadership roles, it can bring new challenges to the dual career academic couple, especially those working in the same discipline and unit. But Chuck successfully pursued his own professional role while supporting Ellen in hers.

When Ellen was recruited as Dean at UT Austin, the School of Journalism welcomed Chuck, an established figure in journalism education, as an added bonus, and he quickly made himself a valuable member of the program as a Senior Professor, serving, among other roles, as Graduate Adviser from 1998 to 2004. His colleagues valued his ability to navigate his roles and to blend his commitments with integrity, grace, and discretion.

Chuck was a great support to those colleagues at UT Austin, at other institutions he joined, and in the larger field. As Zizi Papacharissi recalls,

In the course of his path, he met many of us. And further connected us to each other. I met him at Austin, but he quickly connected me to colleagues that he had crossed paths with at the Institute or through his illustrious career. With Chuck, I first got a feel of what it means to be part of a connected, nomadic, loosely yet meaningfully connected academic family.

At UC-Riverside, Chuck hired Tom Lutz, founder of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, as a faculty member. Lutz recalls, “Through good times and bad, Chuck was a beautiful and steady presence and walked through the minefields with wit and aplomb. I drank with them many times—always just the right amount (a little too much) and will always remember his kindness.”

At Northwestern, Dean O’Keefe recalled that Chuck “quickly established himself as a trusted mentor in the school, and he was invaluable in helping recruit new faculty and support their development.” She said that the outpouring of grief and affection after his death showed an

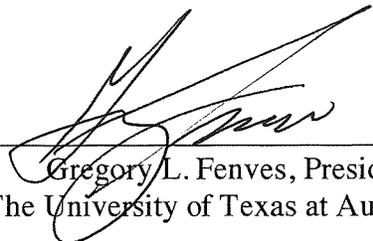
overwhelming consensus about Chuck. Almost everyone who has written me directly or posted online has commented on his warmth, his care for others, and his adorably goofy sense of humor. He was someone who made such a positive difference in the lives of others, someone they were grateful to know. For me, the most striking aspect of this response is the sheer number and diversity of the people who knew and loved him. He had extraordinarily wide acquaintances—and his many, many friends and colleagues have testified about how much they treasured their times with him, and how deeply they will feel this loss.

Zizi maintains that “Chuck will be missed, but he will always be with us.” At his memorial she dedicated a comment from the artist Robert Montgomery to his memory: “The people we love become ghosts inside us and like this we keep them alive.” She then adds,

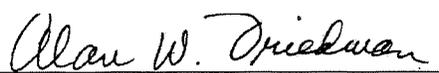
I seem to have attained something that I can only describe as some form of a Chuck hologram that pops up when I am advising students, when I am having a hard time writing, when I do not understand why certain things turn out the way they do—and there’s always a smart quip that comes with it. And for this, I am eternally grateful.

Northwestern’s Dean O’Keefe summed up her recollections of Chuck at the university community’s memorial:

When I was thinking about what I most wanted to say about him today, it was that like everyone else I basked in his warmth, kindness, and bonhomie; but I also found him to be sometimes enigmatic, often surprising, and thoroughly complicated. Most of us have layers—Chuck was more like a turducken: one kind of person hidden inside another, and not always obvious how it all fit together. The easily accessible Chuck was the avuncular academic, the great host, the committed dad, the doting husband. But inside that was the curious, determined, sharp journalist and social critic he was long before becoming a Professor. And when he passed away, I was finally coming to see, deep inside, the Southern gentleman he was born to be—loyal, chivalrous, and fearless.



Gregory L. Fenves, President
The University of Texas at Austin



Alan W. Friedman, Secretary
The General Faculty

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Stephen D. Reese (Chair), Rosental Alves, and Robert Jensen.