

Memorial Resolution Steve Myra

It is fitting that a memorial resolution for Steve Myrah comes before this body. Many of you knew Steve personally, and all of you knew him by reputation, as the second Secretary of the UW-Madison Academic Staff. But what you may not know is that he was one of a small group of people who worked tirelessly to get academic staff awarded governance rights at a time when such an idea was not readily embraced. You are here today because Steve was one who really could tell you what part of “no” he didn’t understand and was not shy about doing so.

Steve would often reminisce about the formative years of the Office of Student Financial Aid, which held a special place in his heart. The early days at the old house on Murray St., fondly known as “Poverty Palace” and then at the University Club, were marked by suspect heating systems, a non-existent cooling system, resident families of bats, and the lingering traces of leftover tear gas. Those were the days of long lines, paper files, and dependence on human interaction rather than on integrated data systems. Staff members held lotteries to determine entitlement to the occasional surplus touchtone telephone. Today’s technology was still far in the future.

Steve oversaw the huge growth in the scholarship programs at UW-Madison. From a few small programs primarily administered by individual colleges the programs grew to include such campus wide aid programs as the Vilas and Knapp Scholarship program. The University’s affiliation with the National Merit Scholarship Program was initiated on his watch.

Steve was most eloquent, however, when he recalled the camaraderie and fellowship that characterized the time spent at OSFA with both full time staff and student employees. He took great pride in the work done by that office to provide the best financial aid to students who wanted to attend what Steve and his colleagues sincerely believed to be the greatest public university in the world.

Dr. Stephen A. Myrah was the heart and soul of that community. Equal parts historian, politician, academic, gentleman, humorist, critic at large, philosopher, and citizen of the world, he was known to jokingly greet new employees by “welcoming them to the regiment.” Steve went about his work with painstaking accuracy and a thoroughly delightful gleam in his eye. He thrived on the lively, companionable exchange of views that routinely left his colleagues impressed by his insights and speechless with laughter. In spite of his great good humor, however, Steve was all business when it came to his absolute dedication to the welfare of students in need and, later, in support of his fellow colleagues on the academic staff. He “gave at the office” in the very best sense of that term. Many people, whether they had the pleasure of knowing him or not, owe him a great debt for his enduring service to the students and staff at the UW-Madison. Making the financial aids award process more streamlined for students wasn’t the only way Steve Myrah made contributions to the institution he so loved. Steve was

a change agent and if he saw something that didn't seem right and good, he was determined to do something about it.

When the Madison campus was merged with other campuses to create the UW System, a new employee classification was created. Professional jobs, unique to academia, but not in the faculty tenure track were put in a separate category distinct from the catchall, unclassified staff. These jobs were called academic staff and new personnel rules were established. Existing legislation recognized the governance rights of administration, faculty, and students but was silent on this newly created personnel category. A large number of employees who had governance rights under the label "unclassified," were now disenfranchised.

In 1975, the Madison Academic Staff Association (MASA) was formed to be the "eyes and ears of academic staff" and attempt to correct this oversight. Steve was both a charter member of MASA and its first president. It took a decade of long meetings, negotiating and some pretty fast legislative footwork, but in 1985, the academic staff was awarded governance rights. One year later, the UW-Madison Academic Staff Assembly was formed. Steve was at the forefront of this effort, serving in the first Assembly, serving on ASEC, and remaining active in MASA. In 1992, when the first Secretary of the Academic Staff retired, Steve was chosen to succeed him thus allowing him to end his career in what he considered to be his "dream job," helping academic staff members be recognized for their contributions to the UW-Madison and have a say in the decisions that affected their work.

In 2000, Steve retired after serving the campus for 34 years. For him, retirement meant shifting the time he spent working with UW-Madison, to the UW-Madison Retirement Association. Steve served as a Board member, secretary, member of the Membership Committee, and chaired the Social Committee until his final day..

As his favorite tee shirt declared Steve was a "reliable source", an avid student of history and reader of the New York Times, he had an uncanny memory and could enhance any conversation with quotes from either or both. His love of politics and political discourse also informed many a conversation. The miniature soldiers he painted with painstaking accuracy, from conflicts we have long forgotten, all came with historical context, which he could spout, with little prompting. By contrast he had a great love for the out-of-doors, spending many hours fishing from bridges and in local trout streams. His deck over looking the Pheasant Branch Nature Preserve with its multitude of bird species gave him many hours of pleasure. He loved classical music and good poetry and as we have recently discovered, had a knack for turning common emotions into simple but inspiring poems. Of course, we would be remiss if we didn't take note of his love for all things Badger and the Green Bay Packers.

In a world gone overboard with hero worship Steve, in his quiet way was the real thing. Dr. Amish Raval who directed the clinical trial for a new stem cell therapy in which Steve was its

first volunteer, referred to him as one of the true “heroes” of the project. Steve Schooler, the Executive Director of Porchlight, called him one of the “unsung heroes” that “non-profit organizations rely so heavily on”. In addition to serving as Porchlight Board Secretary for many years, Steve spent many an early weekend morning preparing and serving breakfasts at the men’s shelter in Madison. He did similar duty representing the Downtown Kiwanis, which he joined soon after his retirement in 2000. A work-study student in the Office of Student Financial Aids referred to him as the “cool uncle” that made her feel comfortable in a new and challenging environment.

Again in the quiet unassuming way that was his trademark he kept several retiree groups meeting regularly to provide each other with fellowship and support. Most notable was a group of UW-Madison administrators who were active on campus in the ‘60s, ‘70s, ‘80s and ‘90s. Even many of the spouses looked forward to his monthly reminder calls and the conversations that inevitably followed. He performed the same function for the UW Retirement Association, on whose Board he has served for many years.

Steve Myrah was born on June 10, 1938 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He lived in Iowa, Nebraska and New Jersey before moving to Milwaukee in 1955. He graduated in 1956 from the Milwaukee University School. Steve received a B.S. in History Cum Laude from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and in 1961 a MS in History. He served two years as an officer in the United States Army before returning to Madison. He completed a doctorate in Higher Education while working as Assistant Director of Student Financial Services. Steve and the endearing love of his life, his wife of 52 years, Dagny, loved to travel the world but also loved the beauty of Wisconsin. He was awarded emeritus status upon his retirement in 2000. In addition to Dagny, Steve is survived by two daughters, Andrea and Leslie, their husbands and seven grandchildren.

UW-Madison was truly his home away from home and he served it well for most of his adult life. From his undergraduate days to retirement Steve spent 40 years on the UW-Madison campus.