

Remembering Kermit L. Hall

By Christine McKnight



Kermit Hall on the uptown campus.

A Personal Tribute to Kermit Hall

His mind was swift, but his thinking deep.
His decisions were quick, but his objectives far seeing.
His style was pragmatic while his goals remained idealistic.
His knowledge was profound, yet simply expressed.
His energy was exhausting but his leadership considerate.
His character was serious while his touch remained light.
Kermit,
You left us too soon.
But what you left us with,
Your humanity,
Your humor,
Your accomplishments,
Simply, your essence,
Will last far beyond your all too brief time among us.

Joseph E. Persico, Class of 1952

Jeff Luks, president of the University at Albany's Alumni Association, described how Kermit Hall grilled the search committee during his final interview before being hired as UAlbany's 17th president. ("He asked us more questions than we asked him.")

Donald G. Gifford of the University of Maryland School of Law recounted his adventures birding with Hall in the swamps of northern Florida. (A hot, sweaty morning culminated in the sighting of an American bald eagle, which, like Hall, had "an extraordinary vision and perspective and soared above us all.")

Stan Albrecht, who succeeded Hall as president of Utah State University, recalled Hall's attempts to milk a cow on the Utah State campus. (He was on the wrong side of the cow at first.)

And Vanderbilt University Chancellor Gordon Gee, who as president of The Ohio State University hired Hall as a humanities dean in 1994, said that Hall "had a passion and a belief" in UAlbany.

FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY AND ACROSS CAMPUS, they came to celebrate the life of Kermit Hall last Sept. 18 in a memorial tribute at the Recreation and Convocation Center. One by one, students, faculty, business and government leaders, alumni and administrators shared their personal stories about the late president and recalled his impact on their lives. The 13 speakers painted a vivid portrait of a gifted leader who was also a kind and caring man. Hall, who died Aug. 13 while vacationing in South Carolina, was 61, and had been UAlbany's president for 18 months.

Susan Herbst, UAlbany's provost and executive vice president, began the program by observing that it was difficult to capture the essence of Hall's life, since he was such a complex and accomplished individual. She predicted that it would be many years before Hall's impact at UAlbany would be fully understood.

State University of New York Chancellor John R. Ryan agreed. "The real legacy of Kermit is yet to be seen here. It will be brought to fruition by the students and the faculty and the alumni," he told the assemblage of 1,500.

Chancellor Ryan offered special condolences to Hall's widow, Phyllis, who sat in the front row amid family members and many of Hall's faculty and administrative colleagues from 30 years at universities throughout the country.

Nick Chiuchiolo, president of UAlbany's Student Association, said Hall cared deeply about students and wanted them to succeed. "He was never too busy to interact with students. No issue was too insignificant, and no student was unimportant," said Chiuchiolo, a junior from Kendall, N.Y.

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Deborah A.W. Read

Director of Development Operations
and Assistant to the Vice President
Cecilia Lauenstein

EDITORIAL STAFF

Executive Editor
Christine Hanson McKnight
cmcknight@uamail.albany.edu

Design
Coppola Design, www.coppoladesign.com

Copy Editor
Carol Olechowski

Contributing Writers
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THE CARILLON

Editor
Melissa Samuels
msamuels@uamail.albany.edu

Class Notes Editor
Kathleen Gaddis
kgaddis@uamail.albany.edu

Design
Mary Sciancalepore

UAlbany magazine on-line:
<http://www.albany.edu/news/index.shtml>

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Professor Leonard Slade Jr., chair of the Department of Africana Studies, said, "Thanks to him, more and more of our programs became nationally ranked." He added that Hall had "achieved greatness" at the University by unifying the campus, hiring a brilliant administrative team and leading the effort to recruit excellent students. Slade's poem, "President Kermit Hall," was printed in the tribute program.

Carl Rosner of The University at Albany Foundation Board of Directors noted that Hall understood the importance of partnering with business and government to help the University achieve its goals. Rosner added that The Foundation would work to implement Hall's plans for the campus.

"He demonstrated an unwavering commitment to the University and set the example for all alumni," said Luks, B.A.'91, M.P.A.'01. "He took the time to celebrate this great university with alumni in cities across the country, and he saw alumni as an integral part of our success."

University Council member Pierre Alric, B.A.'69, said Hall had brought "sensitive and skillful leadership" to the University. He was "intelligent, visionary, insightful and passionate" about his job, said Alric, who was a member of the search committee that interviewed Hall for the UAlbany job in 2004.

Chancellor Gee pointed out that Hall was "not cloistered," but lived life as a "public intellectual" committed to academic freedom for students, teachers and even college presidents.

"We are fortunate to have had him in the fray with us," said Gee.

North Carolina State University Professor Frank Abrams said that, during the 18 months Hall served as NC State's provost and vice president of academic affairs during the early 1990s, "we had 18 years of progress. We had his leadership for far too short a time, but oh, what a time it was. He had great energy, unmatched intellect, and absolute integrity — and it persists still in those he inspired."

James Anderson, UAlbany's vice president for Student Success, had known Hall since NC State. Hall, he said, was "a man for all seasons who was given to us for a reason." Anderson said his mentor fancied himself a comedian ("He thought he was hilarious."). He also recalled Hall's penchant for tearing along the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina and Virginia in his red Corvette with the top down. "Phyllis Hall constantly admonished him about exceeding the speed limit," said

Anderson, "...but Kermit never adhered to the speed limit in life."

For more remembrances of President Kermit Hall, or to share your own memories, please go to: www.albany.edu/president/index.shtml.



A display case shows memorabilia of Kermit Hall. The exhibit was at the reception following the tribute.