Richard Ely, Mentor, Poet

Richard Ely was a popular psychology instructor

By John O’Rourke

Richard Ely, a College of Arts & Sciences instructor in psychology and a leading authority on the acquisition of language in children, was an extraordinarily popular teacher of undergraduates and a beloved mentor to scores of BU students.

“Whether he was lecturing to a class of 200 students or supervising the research of a single individual, he brought to bear his full effort and remarkable capacity for engaging and inspiring students,” says Michael J. Lyons, a CAS psychology professor and department chair. “We have lost a beloved colleague and an exceptional psychology professor and department chair.”

Ely (SON’79) died on January 7, 2011, after a brief illness. He was 63.

Ely’s route to his area of expertise was decidedly unconventional. He earned a BA in French from Tufts University, but spent the next decade working as a carpenter and general contractor. During that time, he also earned a BS at the BU School of Nursing. He then worked as a staff nurse and later head nurse at the Pediatric Emergency Unit at Boston City Hospital, now Boston Medical Center.

Over the course of his distinguished career, Spruill received many accolades, including the prestigious Elliot Norton Award and, in 2003, CFA’s Distinguished Faculty Award.

Speaking of his longtime friend and former colleague, Lacey recalls a man who “loved a theater that was generous and full-blooded, if nuanced, and went for it in his work.”

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