

DAN SWEET

Karen, Danny, Jamie and Katy, John and family – Dan had so many friends.

1. Although we had been colleagues for awhile, Cathy and I first really met Karen and Dan at the Hecht Company in P.G. Plaza. It was late 1969, and we were there to learn how to hold and bathe our soon to be born sons. My first recollection of the evening was the “football hold”. Head in the palm of your hand, legs tucked safely under your arms, free hand for blocking—or perhaps doing a household task. My second, more important recollection was a strong beginning of our 35 year friendship.

For Karen and Dan it was first Danny, and then Jamie—a wonderful family.

2. The Mathematics Department was more raucous then. My wife has forbade me from recounting stories from that era. The Department was growing by leaps and bounds; Vietnam was dominant along with the thrill of mathematics. The Town Hall was our Scottish Café—everyone vying to be Banach. In retrospect, Dan was a raw street-smart kid from New Jersey, a real pistol—we were all kids then. He happened to be brilliant, with a Ph.D. from Brown University, and he was passionate to his dying day and thoughtful and sensitive to the needs of others.

3. And now it is November 18, 2004, too many members of our Department have fallen, and Dan, the young guy of our generation, unbelievably, is dead. The times, they are not only a-changin, they have changed.

Is life a miracle or inexplicable or a scientific longshot? Traditional religions, blessed with the concept of a Deity, define each of our lives as a gift from God. God’s gift of Dan was so much more—it was a spectacular, colorful, compelling, generous gift to so many of us. This is not hyperbole. For those who knew him well, Dan’s life was a bigger than life gift to so many of us. For years, that has been my image of him—bigger than life.

4. Dan was a first rate comedian. His brother John tells that this started when he was quite young. He certainly used to have all of us in stitches. Nerdy mathematicians belly-laughing in the corridors. He was fast, hilarious, and clean!

5. Dan loved the University of Maryland. We’re usually too sophisticated to admit it to each other, but Dan loved Maryland. We used to grouse over the Washington Post’s love affairs with lesser institutions.

He never thought of leaving here—just as all of you could not harbor such a thought. He bled red, Maryland red and, even better, he was a true blue (really blue) American.

6. Dan Sweet is our gold standard for teaching. He was a legislator’s, and administrator’s,

and most importantly, a student's dream. Dan loved teaching, not in the deodorized way of those who love love, but he communicated the mathematics he knew so well to the students he truly cared-for, and he did it as an enviable level of excellence. In this, he was truly a legend in his own time.

I suspect there were many advanced calculus students who much preferred Dan Sweet to the grace of God.

Years ago, in one of our two foot snow blizzards, in the era of a college president who never closed campus, Dan drove-in dangerously from Laurel. He arrived at his office before his 8 a.m. class, a nervous wreck from the drive. The phone rang. It was a student calling saying he couldn't make class because of the weather conditions. Always understanding, Dan commiserated, and said there was no need to brave the elements. "By the way, where are you calling from?" "Denton".

Now I'm sure all of you students attending today received very good grades from Dan. But Dan could give low grades. One student, a dogged registrant from Math 410, had flunked the course 5 times but applied to take it again. Our enlightened administrators decided to pull the student's file. The last 3 times the student had received an F from Professor Sweet. Dan's counsel was sought. As you all know a D or an F have the same depressing consequences, but Dan pointed out that for a student to receive an F from him, the student really had to work at it!

The advanced calculus students flocked to Dan, so much so that departmental administration would schedule his class at the dreaded 8 a.m. hour. No matter, the class would be completely booked in a heartbeat.

To teach Dan's way is not luck, or just working hard. He was deeply intelligent and wise. He was sensitive and passionate and thoughtful and gentle and responsible. His door was always open to his students, and to all students—so it was open on the day of his stroke in his office last week.

7. Dan had many talents and interests. He was an inveterate reader of mysteries. He played the saxophone—he even had his own dance band in his teens. He definitely knew his way around a pool table, not so surprising with his Passaic-Clifton roots. Many of us were the beneficiaries of his great cooking skills. Dan played golf. A remarkable quality of his game is that he could play 18 holes using a very limited vocabulary.

Dan loved horseracing. He told the story of a fellow who goes to the racetrack (perhaps it was Laurel or Pimlico) and bets \$2 to win in the first race. Incredibly, he wins 8 straight races, building his winnings to a half-million dollars. On the ninth race he bets it all to win—and loses! When he gets home, his wife asks, "How did you do at the races?" "Oh, not too bad, I only lost \$2". Karen, maybe for a brief moment you were a millionaire.

8. As we all know, Dan was political, and these qualities (the sensitivity for others, the passion for justice, the thoughtfulness, the gentleness, the responsibility) combined with broad knowledge and gut-wrenchingly honest morality. These qualities defined the man, Dan.

This last year we often discussed the insanity of war, the terror, the moral obfuscation of so many, the callow self-righteous powerful disastrous leadership of those most greatly protected (not only in government but in other influential institutions).

Dan was a very serious, thoughtful, deep man on these matters of life and death. And then, so that we wouldn't all go crazy, his humor would emerge—not the dazzling joke-telling I mentioned before, but more like a release from the intensity. It could be pithy, sharp, sparkling wit—but funny—a true elixir which drew people of all stripes to him.

9. We went to see Dan at home after his heart operations and life-threatening infections. I hadn't visited in awhile. He greeted me at the door, and pointing to his chest, asked if this is what it took for me to visit.

10. Dan was an athlete, and he told me the story of when he pitched in a championship game (major league size stadium, American Legion Baseball). He was called in to pitch in relief with 2 out and the game on the line. He described the opposing batter in Runyonesque terms as an intimidating behemoth. On Dan's first pitch, the batter hit a long fly ball to deep center field; the center fielder ran back, leaped and caught the ball. Dan's team had won. Dan ran to his coach, and said "See, coach, I've really got my stuff today!"

A self-effacing honest humor, from a self-effacing honest man without any pretensions, parsed in Passaic-Clifton-eze, and coming full circle to the deep humility of one who knows life is a gift, and, in Dan's case, a gift for so many others besides himself.

11. I toast you, Dan. I'll sorely miss you, I depended on you, and I loved you.

And I'm just one of so many.

John J. Benedetto