

Remembrances of Jim O'Donnell

Anyone who knew Jim will remember this: with his arms folded and head thrown back he suddenly and vigorously laughs at something you said in the course of a brief exchange. When FDR died Churchill wrote: "meeting him was like opening your first bottle of champagne; knowing him was like drinking it." That's how it was with Jim.

I first met Jim when I joined WAML in 1988. I realized quickly that without trying, he was a sought after center of attention: people would seek him out for his bonhomie, intelligence and good cheer. When you had a conversation with Jim, you were his focus. He had that unique and rare gift of making you appear to be the most interesting person in the world. He and I had the good fortune of sharing many common interests and lived reasonably near one other that we often had get togethers with friends and librarian colleagues. Sometimes I would join him at his church in Pasadena and afterward we would be much delayed in leaving. So many people wanted to have a moment with him and experience the brief joy a chat with him would provide. I would tell him "I feel like the man that accompanied Jackie Kennedy to Paris..." And for his response, go back to my first sentence.

Generous with his time, one of the ways he gave himself to others was through cooking. He was a great cook. I shared many delicious suppers at this home with his partner Ben, his sisters and a close circle of friends. These friends would come to be known as "The Posse." They took care of him during his short battle with cancer.

We often shared the expense of travel to many WAML and ALA conferences. As he was the more extroverted, witty and conversational one, I was happy to watch the lively interactions and try to keep up my end of the discussion. Watching Jim in his many roles as a member of WAML and seeing him participate in committee and executive board discussions, I was struck by how quick and insightful his contributions could be to discussions. He was also a walking dictionary and grammarian and I unintentionally provided him many opportunities to exercise these skills. His ability to absorb details and come to clever decisions quickly was amazing. It was obvious he had a sharp intellect.

Writing about Jim in the past tense is like some tear in the fabric of time, something that was not supposed to happen and something that should not be. As said by the several WAML members who were able to make his memorial service last March, "WAML will not be the same without him".

Greg Armento

Not only was Jim a great map librarian and a hard-working member of WAML, but he was also a very nice person. In 1993 at ALA in New Orleans he looked all over for me to tell me I had been elected WAML president. Jim was willing to be the contact person to tell WAMLites how John and I were doing after our surgeries at USC hospital in 2010. When I was having trouble breathing because of the altitude at a meeting in Salt Lake City, Jim found me a ride back to the dorm. He must have been a great boss, too, because someone at my library worked for him, and she is very saddened by his death. Jim also had a great sense of humor. He and I also shared a love of travel and gardens. I certainly will miss seeing him at WAML meetings.

Kathy Rankin