Robert K. Miller, Jr.

By Stephen McNamee and Cecil Willis

We recently lost a true friend, loyal colleague, and skilled sociologist with the death of Robert K. Miller, Jr. professor emeritus of sociology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Dr. Miller died on Sunday March 8, 2015 of complications from a stroke. He was 66.

Rob joined the Department of Sociology and Criminology at UNC Wilmington in 1977 where he developed a reputation as a passionate, funny, and sometimes controversial professor in the department and university. As longtime friends, we remember him for his generosity, wit, and as a perceptive observer of human foibles.

Rob would often ‘hold court’ in his office regaling the visitor with his reflections on a diverse range of topics demonstrating a real depth of knowledge and understanding of the social world around him. His outlook was one of a cheerful cynic. An example of this view is reflected in his response to the university replacing a parking lot with a nicely landscaped ‘commons’ area that included three ponds which the university community welcomed. His observation was that the ponds would attract seagulls and ducks whose prolific droppings would result in numbers of individuals slipping and falling into the ponds and they would in turn sue the university thereby leading to the ponds being filled in and a return of the parking lots. Not void of self-reflection and aware of his sometimes cynical outlook, he often referred to himself as ‘Evil Rob.’

Rob graduated from Cedar Cliff High School in Camp Hill Pennsylvania, received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology from Franklin & Marshal College and a Ph.D. in Sociology from Temple University in 1978. After graduate school, Rob spent his entire academic career at the University of North Carolina Wilmington where he taught a variety of courses. For many years, he single-handily taught our required undergraduate research methods class. He also regularly taught courses in stratification, race and ethnic group relations, urban sociology, the sociology of education, and the sociology of religion. He earned a reputation as a strict but fair instructor who “professed” more than most and frequently weaved his own life story into his teaching. His students got to know him not just as a professor but as a person with a life outside the classroom. His research was mainly in the areas of stratification and immigration with occasional ventures in other areas. He was an avowed structuralist who emphasized the importance social context, time and place, and social background on individual life circumstances and the trajectory of life chances. His early research was on the experiences of European immigrants to Philadelphia. He especially focused on the structure of urban industrial labor markets that immigrants encountered and how those conditions affected their patterns of assimilation and prospects for employment and mobility. His later research with Stephen
McNamee centered on barriers to mobility especially the cumulative non-merit advantages of familial privilege and wealth inheritance.

We both had the privilege of working with Rob on various projects and learned to value his methodological expertise, creative insight, and assiduous attention to detail. He was highly sought after by colleagues to edit and provide feedback on manuscripts. He was dubbed as “the hawk” who managed to “catch” every glitch. Rob was the consummate sociologist who was always on the job as an acute social observer who saw and experienced life through a sociological lens. This was especially evidenced in one of his later publications with medical sociologist Angela Wadsworth, “An Involuntary Ethnography of a Stay in the Hospital: Being Sick in a Sick Place” about his own experience being hospitalized after a major stroke.

Rob was active in the UNCW community serving on a number of committees and active in the founding of the graduate program in sociology at UNC Wilmington. He was most proud of his role as an advisor and mentor of students. At the community level he served on the Juvenile Research Fund (JDRF) Board of Directors for the Carolina Coastal Branch. Having been diagnosed at age 30, he lived with Type 1 diabetes for more than 30 years. He loved being on the water in his boat at Wrightsville Beach with his family on board. An avid cat lover, his household was always home to a number of stray cats he and his wife adopted. A longtime season ticket holder of UNCW “Seahawk” basketball tickets, he was a loyal, passionate, and verbal fan, often criticizing in colorful language his perceived ineptitude of the referees.

Along with his fondness for stray cats, Rob often befriended and was a champion of those among us who lived outside the mainstream of society. A true indication of his own character is reflected in how he dealt with his own adversity. Early during his academic career he went through a divorce and learned he had Type I diabetes. While these two episodes affected him deeply, eventually he came to accept them and face them with courage and conviction. He remained in an amicable and cordial relationship with his former spouse. He became active in the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation and contributed to this cause in many ways. The diabetes was only the first of a series of health problems he faced including prostate cancer, a number of surgeries, and a series of strokes. Until the end, like the cats he adopted, he seemed to have nine lives, always bouncing back from adversity with a greater determination. More recently, the death of his wife, Mary Susan, was the most difficult for him to overcome and was followed by a series of strokes that eventually overwhelmed him. He faced all of these with a courageous realism and determination that would have weakened a person of less character and strength. For those of us who knew him well, life is a little less full.