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TOP STORY

Family, friends remember WKU professor who died in Vietnam

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Jul 27, 2018



Friends and family of the late Edward W. Bohlander, a sociology professor who taught at Western Kentucky University, remembered him Friday as a man who showed love to his students, family and even strangers on the street.

Gretchen LaGodna, Bohlander's sister, remembered her brother as a "true sociologist."

"By that I mean, a man of the world in that he could communicate with anyone and everyone, and did. It might be kids feeding ducks. It might be some guy pumping gas. It might be a man on death row," she said.

"He believed that there was something to be learned from everyone in every situation, and he always wanted to understand people's lives," LaGodna said. "He always wanted to know what made them tick."

About 200 people gathered in the Jody Richards Hall auditorium at WKU to pay their respects to Bohlander, who died earlier this month after he was severely injured in a fall while traveling in Vietnam.

Bohlander, who also had multiple sclerosis, went into a coma and was stranded in Vietnam for months. His situation prompted an outpouring of community support and an effort to bring him home, but Bohlander passed away just before he was to return. He was 72 years old.

Bohlander earned his bachelor's degree from Ohio State University in 1967, a master's degree from Ball State University in 1969 and a doctorate from OSU in 1973. In that same year, he came to WKU and joined the Department of Sociology, later finishing his career as a professor emeritus. According to his obituary, he taught at the university for 35 years.

Jim Kanan, an associate professor of sociology, said during a eulogy that Bohlander taught about 10,000 students during his career. His research, scholarship and service focused on the criminal justice system.

But Kanan most remembers Bohlander's love for teaching and advising.

“He was a teacher who enjoyed his time in the classroom, probably because it provided him with a captive audience for an hour and 20 minutes,” Kanan said, jokingly.



In one anecdote, Kanan remembers an assignment Bohlander gave his class: to sign a get-well note to the gangster John Gotti after the crime boss was diagnosed with throat cancer in prison. Kanan said Bohlander later received a response from Gotti thanking Bohlander for letting him know “there were at least some people out there who still had faith in him.” Bohlander later arranged for Gotti's daughter, Victoria, to speak to students on campus.

Others remembered Bohlander as a man with a good sense of humor, a love of nature and the gift for making anyone he talked to feel valued.

Bohlander is survived by his son, William, daughter, Elizabeth, and wife, Crystal Bohlander.

Crystal Bohlander, who was a constant presence by her husband's side while he was injured, said her husband was motivated to travel to Vietnam because of his undaunted energy.

“He always had a very adventurous spirit and always wanted to learn more,” she said, adding she's grateful her husband got to experience the trip of his dreams before passing.

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