

Eulogy for Steve:

"Captain Aylward, Aylward's Army, Atilla, the model UN project, Aylwardism" - these terms, found only in a SLUH student's dictionary, reflect in small part the many facets of Steve Aylward who was my close friend and colleague. To this list I would add the descriptions - a man who had a love of teaching, who was multi-talented and interested in a wide variety of areas, who had a deep intellectualism, a warmth of personality - a man who was a gentleman and a scholar.

I met Steve in the fall of 1979 when I started teaching at SLUH. Actually the timing of SLUH's needs for, first a history teacher in '78 and then a Latin teacher in '79, proved to be very fortuitous for me - as Steve later informed me that he would have happily applied for and certainly been hired for the Latin position had that been available in '78. The fact that Steve could just as easily have taught Latin as history illustrates yet another facet of his personality - his thirst for learning that made him so knowledgeable in subjects that ranged from his continuing study of German and French to being an activist for the environment to working to improve the eating habits of the students and in his retirement to volunteering at the Missouri Botanical Garden. In many ways Steve represented the qualities of a "Renaissance man" in the way his enlightened approach to learning history brought students out of the memorization mode and, into the "thinking, questioning, and wanting to learn more" way of studying. That last phrase was a quote from an article by Tim Huether, that appeared in the Prep News in 2006 when Steve retired. Steve educated in the truest sense of the word, i.e., he "led out" from his students their highest level of academic achievement through the rigorous expectations he placed upon himself as educator and on them as individuals to be educated. Many students met Steve for the first time in his sophomore Global History course. I always felt that their experience in this course proved to be one of intellectual awakening that made the students aware of their academic potential. The result of this experience was their desire to challenge themselves further in Steve's Modern European course. The reputation of this course in terms of its academic demands, rewards on the AP test and preparation for college level work gave it an audience of the brightest and finest minds in the senior class, an eloquent tribute to the type of positive academic challenge that was the hallmark of Steve's teaching. Although I don't think Steve considered himself to be a role model, he definitely modeled for his students a way of looking at the world with an open mind, with a sensitivity to the cultures and values of other countries, of showing the students that there are many interpretations - to use Steve's word, to the facts that abound in history.

When Steve passed away one of his former students wrote me a beautiful note in which he described the way that Steve had influenced his life - I am quoting from that letter: "Steve was a teacher who taught me that history was not a bunch of facts....it is about the questions that you ask. And if you ask good ones, those could lead to vital insights about human beings and even yourself. I remember submitting my first paper to him as a senior in his AP European

History course. I had worked hard to develop a good thesis, to document all the facts in my discussion. But I only received a C. I felt devastated but Steve immediately picked me back up, let me know that the first paper was always a learning experience and that good history was driven by good research questions. Steve had the conviction that history always matters and has something new to say. . I would not be the teacher I am without Steve.” This young man, Jason Schlude, is now a Classics Professor at the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University. I think his comments exactly capture the manner in which Steve inspired his students. This unique way of introducing students to the concept of “historical perspective” coupled with his references to Atilla, his alien cat and to his restaurant which he presumably ran as a side effort to his teaching, all were a part of the myth and mystique that came to be known as “Aylward space”, as Michael Jonagan so perfectly described his view of Steve in that same Prep News article.

Beyond his life as a teacher Steve had many other interests about which he was passionate - he was an avid reader and at least once a month he would bring me a book he had just finished reading to give to the SLUH Library, he was a keen railroad enthusiast who travelled by train all over the country, indeed he thought that the only way to travel was by train unless necessity, for example, going to Europe, meant that one had to board a plane. When he returned from his travels he would regale me with stories of the people he had met on the train, the unique sights he had seen in other areas of the country and the beautiful landscapes he had seen from the train, particularly on his trips through Canada. His interest in transportation was also evident in his work for the Citizens for Mass Transit and for Metro Link - both of which organizations he supported by faithfully attending meetings in Jefferson City - Steve not only spoke about issues that were important to him, he also acted upon these issues in a way that showed his commitment and concern. This year he was planning once again to volunteer at the Polar Express at Union Station - an activity which he so enjoyed but which was cancelled last year due to the pandemic. In his work at the Missouri Botanical Garden Steve was able to use his love for and knowledge of Latin as he examined and helped to identify new species of plants - he even had a plant which he discovered named after him! He was a devoted volunteer and earned the Garden’s award of “volunteer of the year” - an award of which he was very proud - his accomplishments in such a variety of areas were remarkable. I mentioned that Steve convinced his students that he also ran a restaurant while he was teaching - although this claim was not exactly accurate, Steve was definitely very much an Epicurean in his appreciation of fine food - dinner at Steve’s was always at least a 5 course and 5 star experience as he tried out recipes he had seen in the New York Times - recipes that were always successful! And in the true style of French cuisine, dinner would include a salad and cheese course after the main course and then dessert. Such dinners were delightful, culinary wonders replete with entertaining conversations that often centered around jazz concerts, politics or Steve’s review of the most recent movie he had seen. These evenings showed yet another aspect of Steve’s personality - he was the perfect host.

In 2006 when Steve announced that he was planning to retire the students were dismayed and surprised - “but you’re so young, why are you doing this, what are you going to do?” Such reactions obviously stemmed from the deep respect, admiration and affection that they felt for Steve - a teacher who was caring and committed to their well-being. That same care

and concern that Steve showed his students were also the qualities that characterized his friendship to me - during the height of the pandemic, when everything was closed and one could not meet friends in restaurants or entertain them at home, Steve and I would meet for a weekly walk - either in University City or in Webster Groves - these weekly get togethers were a “sine qua non” - an essential part of our lives - which we had been enjoying for 40 years and not even a pandemic could make us miss our times of wonderful conversation and being such an important presence in each other’s life. Perhaps the time when I felt this caring and concern from Steve the most strongly was in the fall of 2005 when I had surgery on my vocal cords. After my second operation which occurred near the start of the second quarter, I came into school Mon. morning unable to speak but ready to try to manage with copious notes for the students to read plus a docu-camera to put up translations on the board. As the 29 juniors swarmed into my room and I looked out over the sea of expectant faces, I thought to myself - “can I really do this? Do I really want to do this”? As these self doubts started to take over, the door suddenly opened and Steve appeared saying, “Do you want some help?” I emphatically nodded “yes” and he proceeded to come in and sit with a group of students and work with them on their translation, explaining grammatical and rhetorical mysteries. The students were quite taken aback and comments such as “I didn’t know you knew Latin” and “can you explain Cicero’s use of preterition?” flew around the room. Of course Steve could explain this rhetorical device and he continued to come in every day for the remainder of the quarter, much to the delight of both the juniors and me - his presence made all the difference in getting me through an incredibly difficult time and showed me in the most important way of all how generous Steve was and how sensitive he was to the needs of others.

All of us here have a myriad of memories of Steve - his students who will always value the way in which he developed the life of the mind and the manner in which he helped them through the difficulties they faced as teen-agers, his family and those of us who were fortunate enough to have Steve as a friend who was always there for us - all of us owe Steve our gratitude for the gift he gave to us of being a part of that unique and unforgettable experience that was “Aylward space”.