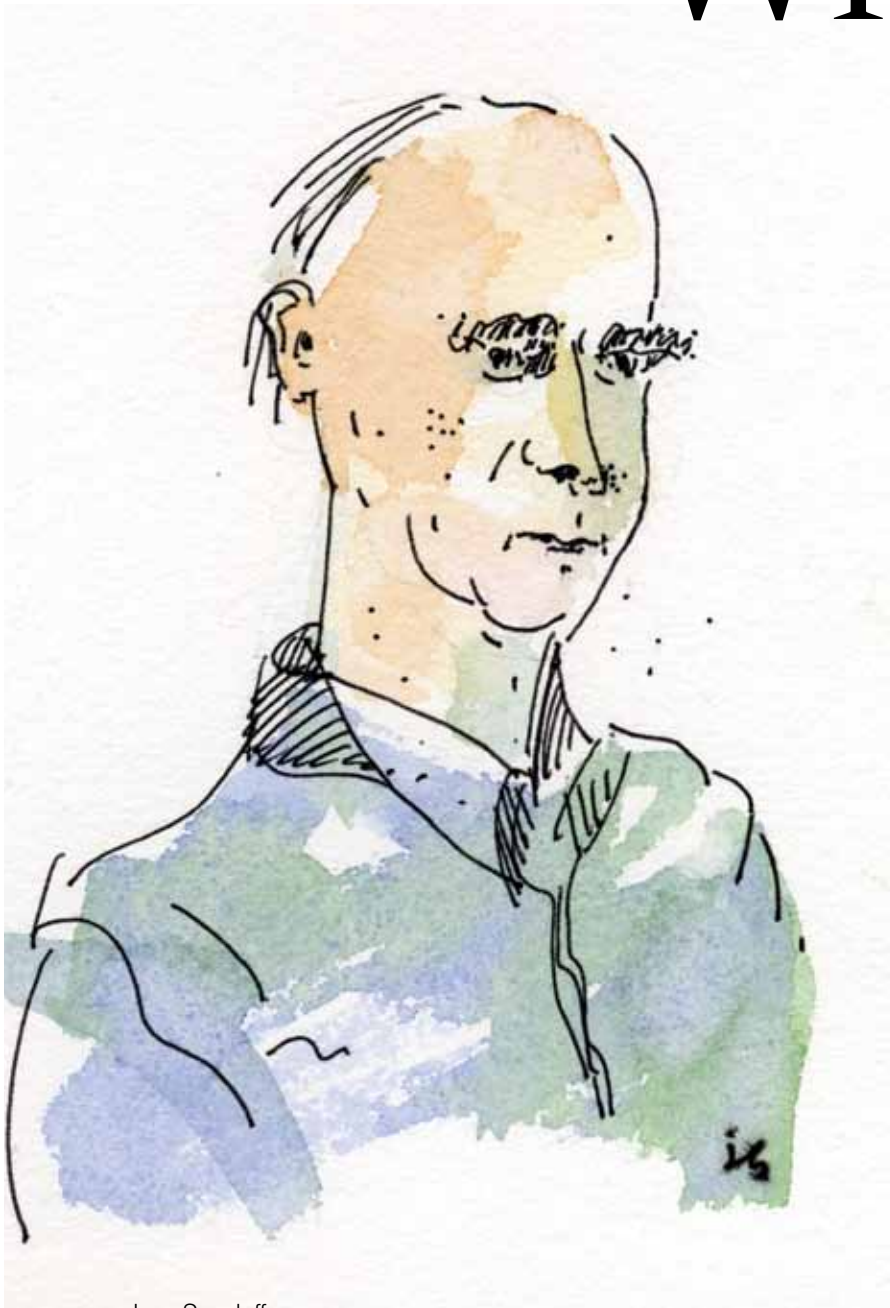


Ages of Wisdom

A Tribute to Eric Davis

Eric Davis joined the English faculty in the fall of 1972, a mere three years after receiving his Ph.D. from Harvard, and fresh from a stint at Windham College in Putnam, VT. It was “a good decade to start teaching at Commonwealth,” he wrote many years later. “In the classrooms, very little was taken for granted...analysis was a subversive activity. Sexy!”



Jean Segaloff

“WHAT I DO IS ME: FOR THAT I CAME.”

—Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As kingfishers catch fire”

As Eric concludes his tenure at Commonwealth, we invited the members of our community to send us their stories and memories of this legendary Commonwealth presence. Many responded. We asked Polly Chatfield, Eric’s dear friend and his colleague for so many years, to undertake the daunting task of selecting and knitting together some of these recollections. We thank everyone who wrote so lovingly about this great teacher, advisor, and friend. All the letters we have received will be collected and presented to Eric.

Why, when pondering about how to write something worthy of the wonder that is Eric Davis, did I first think of *The Fatal Gazogene*? Perhaps because that little one-act play by George Bernard Shaw, performed at Hancock in the long ago, and featuring Eric among the performers, embodies the spirit of joy in the ridiculous that has always filled his classroom. The preliminary stage directions for the play describe the furniture and props, adding that “a certain air of theatricality is produced by the fact that though the room is rectangular it has only three walls.” Just that sort of whimsical fun is what generations of Eric’s students and colleagues remember with delight.

They remember his profound kindness, his extraordinary empathy for the anxieties of adolescence and (as former teacher Richard Robinson put it) his understanding of “the disturbing energies of youth.” Students spanning the generations write of his “quiet, patient, deliberate inquisitiveness” (Emily Borman ’84), “the way his patient and thoughtful presence made me feel so safe” (Emma Sung ’12), how “he always seemed genuinely interested in us” (Hao-Li Loh ’80). “Mr. Davis set an example of how to care about teenagers,” says Tom Brudney ’75. Amy Young ’76 echoes, “His kind, non-judgmental acceptance taught...deeper lessons than mere literary criticism.”

But most of all, even decades after their teenage years, students remember the twinkle in the bright blue eyes under those storybook-owl eyebrows, as Eric persuaded them that reading could be deeply delicious, lovely, hilarious, and profoundly important all at the same time. Every encounter with this special man could be a source of learning and joy.

A meticulous teacher, he would rarely yield in his standards, but he might bend in surprising directions, as Elizabeth Swan ’78 recalled. “I had a meeting with Mr. Davis to discuss a writing assignment on the Joyce story ‘Araby.’ Mr. Davis had great things to say about my paper and told me he’d shown it to other classmates as an example of keen insight or good writing—I can’t recall which; I just remember that he had underlined parts of the paper multiple times in different colored pens. Feeling a surge of pride and basking in the glow of my favorite teacher’s approval, I asked him why my grade was only a B+. He looked down at my paper, took a beat,

and then outlined my B+, gave it wings and a flourish and asked, “There, how’s that?”

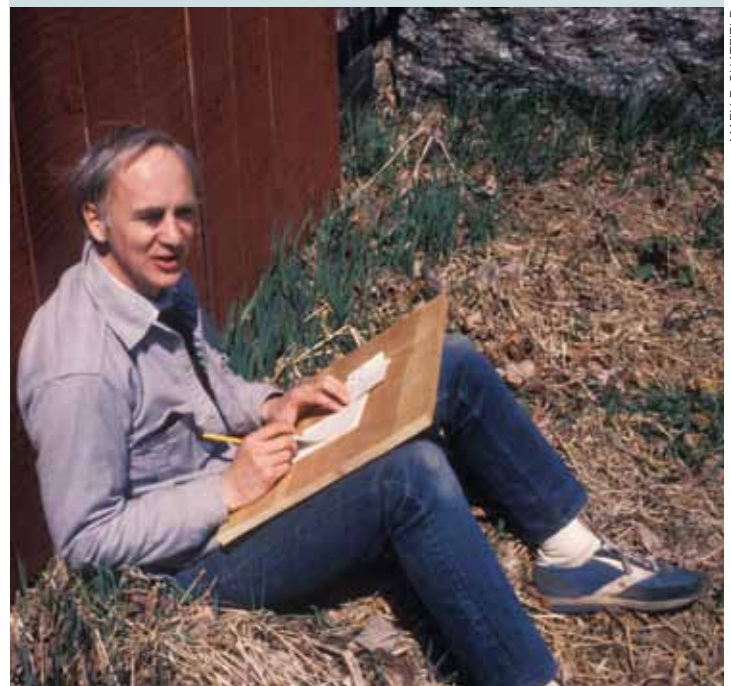
So many students feel that his teaching shaped their lives as readers—“Half a lifetime ago I was the beneficiary of the loveliest teaching one could hope for, meeting in a tutorial with Mr. Davis a couple of times a week to work our way through *Twelfth Night*,” muses Michael Train ’89—and even more as human beings. “I carry Eric Davis around with me every day,” says David Hershey-Webb ’75. “He is part of who I am, because he was one of the people who taught me how to read and how to care about literature.” And from Julian Lampert ’94, “Mr. Davis’ exquisite tact, sensitivity, and refinement...offered me words of wisdom and guidance...and helped me focus into what my own voice was telling me.”

Michael Sailsman ’06 wrote: “Even after I was no longer one of his students...we planned a weekly lunch which essentially served as a therapy session for me. During those 45 minutes each week I was able to divulge all my fears, my hopes, and what now seem like trivial concerns. Those are my most vivid memories of Commonwealth... Mr. Davis and me, sitting in his classroom eating Darryl’s chili, discussing whatever happened to be on my mind that day.”

“In the months I have left at school I’m going to tell lots of lies,” says the man himself, springing the familiar whimsy. “It surprises people. They don’t quite know what to think—Who is this man, really?” He continues, “I need people to tease; I love

“Eric is Commonwealth.”

—Melissa Glenn Haber ’87



At Hancock, c.1983.

MARY P. CHATFIELD

an audience.” And what will he do when, come June, he no longer has that audience? “I want to have real time to write, and, to quote Charles Merrill’s *Amen*, ‘If not now when?’ I want to take the road less travelled by for a bit. I love it when you have time to get your talons into something so that it really possesses you.”

Eric insists this article contain some “bad things.” What bad things? There is an episode Ariel Stulberg ’01 remembers fondly. “After asking me to stop chatting to a friend in class, first ironically, then politely, Mr. Davis finally picked up my backpack and dropped it on me with an over-the-top look of exasperation.” Or, somewhat ruefully, Eric himself recalls the day when, surveying his class, he remarked that one of his students appeared puzzled. “This topic seems like it might be going over your head,” he said, to which the student nodded in agreement. Eric then went on, “Well, if you stand up, maybe it will hit you in the face.” Members of that class still remember the incident, including Elisabeth Swan, who wrote, “What struck me was both Mr. Davis’ obvious merriment at the joke and his amazing ability to convey warmth and understanding to the student involved.”

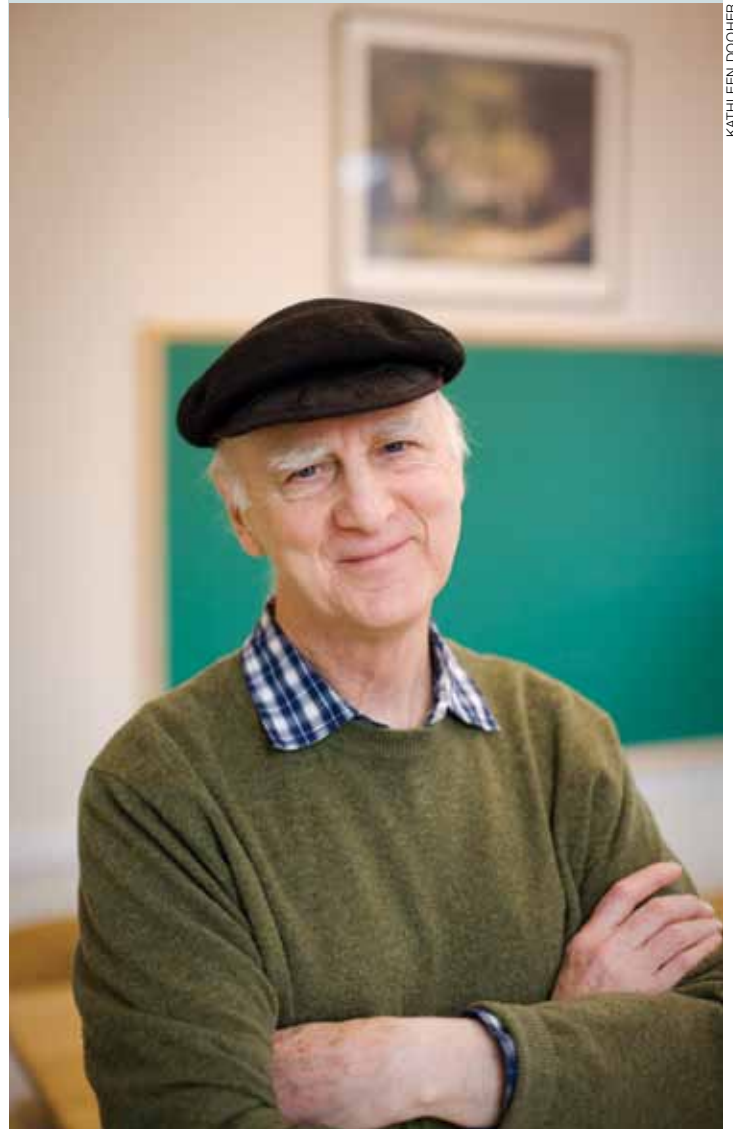
Having Eric as one’s teacher or advisor or colleague was to let oneself in for surprises: gifts of fun, gifts of insight. As Anne (Morgan) Spalter ’82 remembers, “It was midterm exams in freshman English. We settled in with our blue composition books and there were only the sounds of writing and the hissing of the radiator. After answering a pair of challenging but not unexpected questions, I read, to my great surprise, essay question three: ‘Write about the Conquest of Peru.’ I vaguely knew there was a big book with this name but it certainly was not one we had read in class. I paused, stunned. But then I gathered my creativity and wrote a ‘report’ on the book, involving much craziness. I think the radiator appeared as a character.” What a wonderfully wise way to defuse the anxieties of students’ first encounter with three-hour exams!

Or this from Sarah Stearns ’10: “In my freshman-year English class we were reading *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. In an early chapter one character stands on a hill and leads the others in a rousing battle cry of some kind. During our discussion of this chapter one student mused over the awesome power of that scene. ‘Would you like to try it?’ Mr. Davis asked him. We were all confused. ‘Let’s try it. Please lead us,’ Mr. Davis insisted. The student faltered but Mr. Davis was persistent. After another half-hearted go, Mr. Davis suggested that the student might need a spear to lead the rest of the class in a proper battle cry. There was always a mysterious eight-foot-tall wooden spear in his classroom—maybe it’s still there—and that was the only time we ever got permission to touch it. The leader stands above his tribesmen, Mr. Davis pointed out. So, spear in hand, this kid clambered onto the table and led us all in a cheer of ‘*Umuofia Kwenu!*’ until students from nearby classrooms were sent to tell us to keep it down.”

Colleagues most often mention Eric’s remarkably perceptive insights. Larry Geffin ’69 speaks for many: “In the long grading meetings, this wise, kind, and very funny man could always be counted on to steer the conversation in helpful ways. Eloquent and with compassion, he would launch into a thoughtful and unsentimental account of the tiny progresses, efforts, and rising aspirations of the student under discussion, things that apparently others of us had dismissed, or missed altogether. He reminded us that being an immature sixteen-year-old is not a sin; it’s a condition.”

It is no wonder that his former students love him and that so many took the time to craft loving reminiscences. “Eric is Commonwealth,” says Melissa Glenn Haber ’87, “its inventiveness,

“I want to take the road less travelled by for a bit. I love it when you have time to get your talons into something so it really possesses you.”



KATHLEEN DOHER

its zest and good humor, its deep sensitivity, its orneriness, its conviction.” He is what any good teacher aspires to be. As Ivan Kreilkamp ’86 put it: “He didn’t simply teach methods or techniques of interpretation, but modeled a way of being an intellectual, an interpreter, a writer, and a thinker.”

Dear Eric, all of us who have felt the grace of your wisdom and mischievous wit will echo the words of Amir Soltani ’84: “Thank you...for being yourself...for the gift of your presence—it is deep enough to fill all kinds of absence and gentle enough to undo all kinds of pretense. May we all learn to live out of joy, out of love, and out of wonder.”

With love,
Polly