



Harbor Country Day School  
*Embracing the extraordinary in every child.™*

## Memories of James C. Swink (1950-1991)

*From Michael Scheman, '81*

Jim Swink was someone who encouraged nonconformists.

Junior High School can be an awful time, and my two years at Harbor were pretty miserable. But Jim Swink's classroom was always a haven for those of us who couldn't care less about the Islanders or who it was cool to ignore that day. With Jim, what counted was your imagination, your creative ideas, and yes, God help me, even your sensitivity. He pondered my Tony Award predictions, helped me prep for our G&S shows, and genuinely seemed to care about whatever new story I'd just written. He inspired in me a love of literature and an appreciation for the potency of language. He was a phenomenal listener, a shoulder to cry on, and when you made him laugh, it made your week. I think of him often, whether I notice *To Kill a Mockingbird* on my bookshelf or when someone auditions for me with *Our Town*. He will always live on in my memory; An unforgettable teacher and champion of the outsiders.

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*From Marlowe Bechmann (Scheyer) '82*

Mr. Swink knew how to make literature relevant and exciting and was able to connect to 7th graders. I was always excited to go to English class and still clearly remember our class discussions on *Animal Farm*, *A Separate Peace*, *A Catcher in the Rye*, and many others. He was always my favorite teacher and it was my favorite subject because of that.

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*From Jeffrey Lipitz '82*

I attended Harbor Country Day School in 1981 and 1982, and they were the most memorable experiences in my entire academic career. I cannot recall any of my high school and college professors' names but at HCDS I can tell you that my Science

Teacher was Ms. Scott, My Social Studies Teacher was Mr. Russell, my Math Teacher was Mr. Bruin, my Gym Teacher was Mr. Bonoro, and of course, Mr. James Swink was my English Teacher.

Mr. Swink was an extremely influential teacher because he had such a passion for not just teaching but for the subject matter as well. I recall the coursework being rigorous but enjoyable. He was one of those teachers that you wanted to do your best for. He had a way of bringing out the best in your ability. I do not recall any specific assignments but I do recall reading some of the classics such as *Animal Farm*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Lord of The Flies*. We had in-depth discussions about these books in and out of the classroom and I was always excited to read what was next on the list.

Mr. Swink sparked the interest that I currently have for reading and I am still an avid reader to this very day. I remember in my early 30s I went out and purchased a few classics that I read at HCDS and enjoyed them as much as I did in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades.

I am sure that if Mr. Swink was with us today, he would have been on the Goodreads app and I would be following him and reading his reviews of books and reading along with him.

When I asked my fellow classmates to share some thoughts about Mr. Swink they all recalled his love for the theater. I do remember that as well. I recall we put on the plays *The Pirates of Penzance* and *The HMS Pinafore*. He was very involved in these productions, and he made sure that they went off without issue.

On a more personal note, I do recall that he was an immaculate dresser and he used to wear a vest with his dress shirts. I am a car aficionado and he drove a Honda Civic. I remember the day he showed me his car and how the car had a manual choke to help it warm up in cold weather.

The craziest personal memory I have of him was when I was with my grandparents in Italy and we were standing on top of the Spanish Steps and I said to my Grandmother, "See that guy down there? That is my English teacher, Mr. Swink!". She did not believe me and I screamed down to him "HEY MR. SWINK..." He turned around but did not see us immediately. We went down to say hello and I still recall how he jokingly said: "I go halfway around the world to get away from these kids and they still find a way to find me!" We all had a good laugh! That is a memory that I will always remember and still makes me smile to this very day.

I would like to thank Harbor for asking me to share some thoughts about Mr. Swink for the HCDS Spring Benefit. If Mr. Swink was here, I know that he would be so proud to be honored this evening, and I would have loved the opportunity to thank him for all he has done for me in person, but I know that he is with us all tonight with a book and lesson plan in hand.

Writing these memories was an absolute pleasure and warmed my heart with special memories and took me back to a place where I felt most at home. My Harbor Country Day School. I cannot thank HCDS enough and especially Mr. Swink for all they did for me back then, to this very day, and in my personal, academic, and professional life.

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*From Elisa Sickman Zied '84*

When I think back to my short time at Harbor Country Day School in the early 80s, the teacher I remember most, not only for his vibrance and distinctive voice but for his kindness, is Mr. Swink. While it had been my intent to stay at Dawnwood, the public junior high school I attended with friends I'd grown up with, a mean girl who bullied me and turned many of my so-called friends against me led me to transfer to Harbor Country Day School for 8th grade. Attending Harbor proved to be an invaluable decision, not only because of the 17 other students in my class who welcomed me, the new girl, with open arms but because of encouraging, supportive teachers like Mr. Swink. Whether praising my recitation of the "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech from Julius Caesar or complimenting me on my voice after singing "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair" in the school-wide talent show, small details from 40 years ago that I've never forgotten, Mr. Swink always had a kind word. He gave me confidence and made me feel smart and talented. He also made me feel like I could accomplish anything I set my mind to. Although I wish I'd known him far longer than I did, and wish his time on this earth were at least double what it was, his impact on me and so many students lucky enough to have known him is everlasting.

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*From Lisa Finkel Broock '86*

Mr. Swink was a wonderful teacher. He was supportive and encouraging and made me feel seen at a time when I didn't. It's no surprise that so many of his former students have embraced the written word. He certainly fostered my love of storytelling. We are all the better for having had him as our teacher.

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*From Harry Lerner '80*

I remember Mr. Swink explaining to us how the Southern accent could be wonderfully sweet when you speak it like this, but menacingly sinister when you speak it like that. That had to be one of his greatest gifts. When he read *To Kill a*

*Mockingbird* from behind his lectern, he delivered the full range of voices, from innocent to frightening, often in the same breath, with incomparable authenticity. It was totally mesmerizing, and my 7th-grade classmates and I would sit spellbound and silent for the entire class period. Interestingly, even though Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* took place far away from the Deep South, Mr. Swink's reading aloud of the section where Snowden lay dying in the back of the plane had that same sweet menace. I've never heard it the same way from anyone else. It was pure magic. This was one of many gifts Mr. Swink left behind. I am sad not to be able to tell him how I feel about him or the impact that he had on me.

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*From Mr. Frank de Knipp, 4th Grade & Upper School history teacher (1984-2009)*

Jim Swink had an English room just a door down from me and I got to know him. He welcomed me to the school and helped me every chance he got. He would just look in to see what was going on and, since I was the bridge between the lower and upper school, he went ahead and let me know, "these are the expectations I have for my students when they come in," so I could make sure they were prepared.

All I can say is that you know the children just absolutely loved him. When he taught a lesson, let's say it was on Shakespeare or anybody, he just sucked the kids right into the classroom. Here we're talking about someone who lived way back when but it never seemed like it. I'd walked by his room every now and then and I'd stand in the corner and it was like, "Whoa, this is great!"

Mr. Swink was the epitome of a gentleman. Dressed the part, acted the part, and if a student walked into his classroom when he was on a break, it was the student's time. He could be any place in the school; if a student approached him, and that included somebody in the lower school or a parent, he would always make time for them. He never looked at his watch. You were his focus. He was just a wonderful man.