Late professor inspires gift by former student

Consider this sentence from the obituary of former SDSU English Professor Jerry Yarbrough: “The memories and lessons he taught in the classroom, church and elsewhere will be cherished by those that remember his courage, his intellect and his faith.”

That’s high praise, even by the over heated standards that govern obituary writing. But every word of it is true according to Ginny Bunkers-Ford who turned her fondness and respect for Yarbrough into a lasting legacy on the SDSU campus.

Ginny and her husband, John, sold a lot in Phoenix and split the proceeds of the sale between their alma maters. John’s went to St. John’s University. Ginny’s share went to SDSU to create an endowment for the English Department’s Writing Center and fund a discretionary account to pay for expenses.

“I’d like to see the Writing Center live up to its name and be the center for writing in the university; where it’s not just the students who come in, but faculty for workshops and those sorts of things too, a more wide-reaching institution,” said Nathan Serfling, the Writing Center coordinator.

The center offers tutoring for composition students five days a week. Located in a room off the main lobby of the H.M. Briggs Library, the decor features a life-size photo depicting a scene from Oakwood Lake, the namesake of the school’s literary magazine. Oakwood was selected as the name of the journal to resemble Henry David Thoreau’s inspiration from Walden Pond.

The center also has a photo of Yarbrough, a quote from Distinguished Professor Charles Woodard, who served on the faculty with Yarbrough and a quote from Ginny.

“When I describe Dr. Yarbrough to people, I tell them about the scholarly professor of Victorian literature with the most gentlemanly manner and the slightly wicked sense of humor,” Ginny said. “I remember smiling for the rest of the day when I came away from encounters with him.”

Professor Yarbrough encouraged Ginny to apply for graduate school, and she earned her master’s degree in 1976.

“He went about his teaching without expecting recognition for his dedication and hard work,” Ginny said. “His reward was in inspiring his students to think about and discuss literature. I guess that’s why I asked that my gift be used to keep his name and memory alive at SDSU where he spent most of his career.”

Yarbrough earned his doctorate in English at the University of Texas in 1967. He taught at Northeast Louisiana State before coming to SDSU in 1968. He retired in 1998.

During graduate school, Ginny was a teaching assistant in the English Department teaching...
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"When I had the option of choosing to fund the Writing Center with my gift, I was thrilled," Ginny said. "Honoring Dr. Yarbrough’s work in the English Department seemed very fitting."

Professor Yarbrough died on Jan. 24, 2014, at the age of 79.

"I will always remember him with affection and great respect," Ginny said. "and am pleased that his name will be on the Writing Center for years to come."

"Ginny’s gift is really a gift to the students of SDSU," said Dr. Jason McEntee, Professor and Head of the Department of English. "Anything we can do to improve the Writing Center ultimately improves the academic experience for our students. She has made this possible, and I could not be more delighted that a gift of this nature is going straight into an enhanced academic experience for our students."