

DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
JAMES L. KINNEAVY**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution James L. Kinneavy, Professor, Department of English, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

**IN MEMORIAM
JAMES L. KINNEAVY**

James L. Kinneavy, an unassuming giant of twentieth century rhetoric, died on August 10, 1999, at the age of 79 following a brief illness. Kinneavy is credited with a major role in the national revival of the study of rhetoric and composition, including founding a nationally acclaimed PhD concentration in rhetoric at the University of Texas at Austin.

Jim Kinneavy was born in Edgewater, Colorado, in 1920, the eldest of five children who were raised in an orphanage after the death of their mother in 1927. At the age of 15 he joined the Christian Brothers, a teaching order of the Catholic Church. Kinneavy received his BA in English from the College of Santa Fe in 1942 and began his 55-year career in the classroom as an elementary teacher in Bernalillo, New Mexico. Later he taught math, sciences, languages, music, and English in secondary schools in Louisiana before earning an MA in 1950 and a PhD in 1956 at the Catholic University of America.

After leaving the Christian Brothers in 1957, Jim Kinneavy taught for five years at Western State College in Gunnison, Colorado, before joining the faculty at Texas in 1963, where he taught for thirty-three years in the Departments of English and Curriculum and Instruction and in the Division of Rhetoric and Composition. He served as director of freshman English from 1975-1982 and again as an interim director of lower-division English from 1990-1992 after he had retired. From 1979-1982 he was chair of the graduate rhetoric concentration which he founded. He was appointed Jane and Roland Blumberg Centennial Professor in 1983, which he held until his retirement in 1990. He continued to teach on modified service until 1996.

In appreciation for his help in shaping its writing curriculum, St. Edward's University awarded Kinneavy an honorary doctorate in humane letters in 1980. His contributions to rhetoric and composition were recognized with the Conference on College Composition and Communication's Exemplar Award in 1995. In 1995 he also received the Pro Bene Meritis Award from the College of Liberal Arts.

Kinneavy is best known for his broadly influential book, *A Theory of Discourse*, published in 1971, which provided a unifying framework for understanding many kinds of writing and reestablished important connections between writing instruction and classical rhetoric. Kinneavy was instrumental in reminding us of how contexts shape purposes — reintroducing the concept of *kairos* to contemporary rhetorical theory. With a practical concern for the process of discovering what is appropriate in a particular situation, Kinneavy used the elements of the communication situation (audience, author, text, and referent) to develop a philosophy of the aims of discourse (persuasive, self-expressive, literary, and referential). He also updated the theory of modes (description, narration, evaluation, and classification) to explain how those aims might be achieved. For Kinneavy, rhetoric was a humanistic philosophy of practical action as well as an art and a craft.

The Texas Education Agency adopted his theory of discourse as the foundation of its English program, as did the State of Wisconsin. In addition to *A Theory of Discourse*, Kinneavy published six other books, including *Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition* (1985) and *Greek Rhetorical Origins of Christian Faith: An*

Inquiry (1987), and over thirty articles. His main project during his final years was articulating a practical means of implementing moral and ethical education.

Kinneavy was not, however, a traditionalist or conventional in his approaches; instead he reinvigorated familiar rhetorical categories and made them apply to contemporary situations. As rhetoric was being mediated in new ways, Kinneavy helped people translate classical concepts such as *kairos*, *phronesis*, and *praxis* into discussions of feminism, citizenship, and the relations of humanistic reflection and debate to deliberative action. Late in his career he even began teaching writing using networked computers and delivered a paper at a national conference explaining the advantages of going digital.

As a teacher and administrator, Kinneavy influenced thousands of students. He lobbied intensely for undergraduate writing courses that served students at every level, and he ran a complex and highly respected freshman writing program, one that served as a model for other institutions and as a training ground for future teachers and administrators. His work with graduate students — as a professional and scholarly mentor — was legendary and is one of his most enduring legacies. Tributes from many of his students can be found online at: <www.drc.utexas.edu/faculty/kinneavy>. They tell of a humble man of quiet greatness, always generous toward students and colleagues, with a joy and enthusiasm for all of life, a joy that was disseminated to thousands of people who benefited from knowing him. UT alum Jim Raymond, now professor of English at the University of Alabama, says of these tributes: "Few of us, if any, will leave the trail of memories that Dr. K. left. But his example makes us want to try — and that's a tribute in itself, a sort of continuation of the spirit once the flesh has given out."

Many at Texas remember Kinneavy as a practicing rhetorician. At meetings of the Department of English, Faculty Senate, and University Council during his thirty-three years at Texas, he was a familiar figure. He would enter the room clutching his clipboard and take a seat among his colleagues, not always with those who shared his positions. He would choose his moment carefully, rarely among the first to speak and just as rarely among the last; parliamentary strategies of closure were not his forte. But his presence always counted in a debate. The audience would anticipate something important from him, something serious, carefully framed, and often witty — and inevitably he delivered on this promise. Rising slowly on a painful hip, turning a half circle to face his listeners, he would first consult the clipboard where his arguments were stored and then begin.

A series of logical points followed, deliberately arranged and fully supported by evidence. His tone would be moderate and his lines of argument were mostly appeals to reason — artistic and inartistic proofs in proper Aristotelian fashion. He was not without passion, but conveyed his feelings chiefly through gestures; a twist of his shoulder or a fluttering of his bushy eyebrows could signal outrage, anger, or wry amusement. When he was finished, he would sit quietly, at least for a while, satisfied with the opportunity to have made his case. And his words did always matter and often changed the direction of a meeting.

But Kinneavy did not always prevail. As secretary of the General Faculty and chair of the Faculty-Student Advisory Committee to Select the University President in 1974-1975, he became the spokesman for faculty opposition to the selection of Lorene Rogers as president. A decade later he argued unsuccessfully for a writing-across-the-curriculum program which he had created. Even in defeat he valued above all the process of politics and honored the tradition of democratic engagement — win or lose. When there was little or no hope of prevailing in a struggle, he understood how voices of reasonable dissent are essential to the political process and that people are at their best when engaged in respectful debate.

The loss of Jim Kinneavy is profound for the University, but his work will continue as an inspiration for civil public discourse.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Lester Faigley (chair), Davida Charney, and John Ruszkiewicz.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on December 7, 1999. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: <http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/>