

Call me John: a community celebrates the life of Dr. John Conlon

“Somewhere in Heaven, some angelic director is leaping with joy that John has joined his cast,” said Norine Noonan, vice chancellor of USFSP academic affairs. She spoke during the celebration of John Conlon’s life at the St. Petersburg City Theatre on Saturday.

John Conlon, 66, was a renaissance man. He taught literature and theater classes; wrote a book; wrote, directed and performed in plays; volunteered at the St. Petersburg Sail and Power Squadron; and served for three years as president of the St. Petersburg City Theatre. And yet he always had time for everyone.

At USFSP, John was known for his love for “Hamlet,” bow ties and the theatre. He liked to grade papers in the gardens at the Museum of Fine Arts. Proud of his Irish roots, he held dual-citizenship in the U.S. and the Republic of Ireland. Sometimes he talked in an Irish accent for his students. He had strawberry blonde hair, a booming voice and a ton of charisma. He asked everyone to call him John.

At home, John liked watching the sea birds in the early mornings with his companion, Margaret Musmon. They held hands when they drove and when they walked together. He taught his children, Nicole and Sean, to be proud of their Irish heritage. He asked them to call him Da.

Whether in his personal or professional life, what people remember most about John is his concern for other people.

“No matter what, you could go to Dr. Conlon. If you had a problem at school or if you had something you were struggling with personally, he was always there for you,” said Danielle Halpern, who took four of his classes and collaborated on producing “The Vagina Monologues” with him.

Jamie Le’ora Stewart, a former student and colleague, said his mantra was, “How can I help you grow?”

John often started a new semester by asking his class what they wanted to learn. In an honors class on Victorian literature, his students sat in a circle and discussed books like “Bleak House.” If someone asked a question about

Victorian fashion, he devoted the next hour to discussing it, said former student Tara McCarty.

“Even when he was teaching an English course, Dr. Conlon was always ... very theatrical,” Halpern said. “He just had a way of capturing any audience he was in front of, whether it was a performance or a classroom.”

John started out at USFSP as a student, after he retired from almost 30 years of teaching at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. He audited a Shakespeare class with Lisa Starks-Estes, department chair and associate professor of English, but he didn't tell her his credentials.

“Once I did discover his background and desire to teach, I was thrilled,” Starks-Estes said.

Around campus, John often dropped by colleagues' offices to say hello or bring a gift. For Starks-Estes, it might be a funny book about Shakespeare. For Jennifer Woroner, the office manager at the College of Arts and Sciences, it was a weekly gift of limes from his fruit tree.

He gave students the gift of theater, supervising the drama club and collaborating with students for annual productions of “The Vagina Monologues.”

In the community, John directed many other plays, including “Twelfth Night” at the St. Petersburg City Theatre. He was a charismatic actor, playing characters that ranged from Polonius to Atticus Finch.

“I think he loved being able to be anyone he wanted,” Halpern said.

She said she got goose bumps when she watched his performance in “God's Trombones” because she “could feel the power of what he was talking about.”

When he wasn't directing or acting, John often volunteered to be extra theater security in the evenings. He always brought his boxer, Rameses the Wonder Dog, and a good book, which was often bookmarked using an envelope or a scrap of tissue paper.

John shared his passion for books with his children. He wrote inside every book he gave his daughter, Nicole Conlon-McCombe. After John's death on August 31 from leukemia, Nicole wanted to create a memorial bookmark with one of his favorite quotes.

She picked up a book of sonnets he'd given her and looked at the cover, which was inscribed, “To Nicole, Love Da, Christmas 2000,” with Shakespeare's “Sonnet 74.” She said the words felt like a message to her: “The earth can have but earth, / Which is his due; / My spirit is thine, / The better part of me.”