

# Day's passion for arts, teaching recalled at memorial service



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“One more time, with feeling.”

That was one of the mottoes by which John Day, former dean of USD’s College of Fine Arts, lived his life, and it was one of the many remembered about him at his memorial service last week.

Day died Sept. 29, and a group of his colleagues, friends and admirers gathered to pay tribute to him in the Wayne S. Knutson Theatre Nov. 1.

If there was one thing people remembered about Day, it was his passion.

“John’s passion brought other people along in the hopes that they, too, would develop the same passion he had for everything they do,” said current fine arts dean Larry Schou, who was hired by Day. “Today we celebrate that man for all the feeling he put into his career and his life for us and for South Dakota.”

Day held a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Notre Dame, and joined USD in 1976 after serving on the faculty at Mount Marty College in Yankton.

He served as art department chair at USD until he became dean in 1980. He also served as vice president for academic affairs in 1984-1985.

In addition to this, Day served as director of the University Art Galleries

from 1977-2009, during which time he curated more than 50 major exhibitions.

Ron Moyer, professor emeritus, USD Department of Theatre, said the College of Fine Arts was “saddled” with a number of things during Day’s tenure as its dean.

“We were saddled with John’s passion for excellence in education, his passion for fairness for all people, his passion for the university and the institution and the college as a committed community of artists and teachers,” Moyer said.

“We were saddled with a true leader, with an evangelist for the arts for all South Dakotans, dedicated to the conviction that, as reflection and expression, the arts are at the heart of the human spirit and the core of helping society.”

Day also served as curator of the USD Oscar Howe Collection, the world’s largest collection of work by the artist. As part of this role, Day lectured and wrote on the life and art of Howe for more than 30 years, and organized more than 20 Howe exhibitions.

According to the USD Web site, he was “instrumental” in establishing the Oscar Howe Archives and the Oscar Howe Memorial Association at USD, as well.

“Because of his

influence and his caring for the arts, he felt that Native artists should receive their time in the spotlight,” said Native American artist Arthur Amiotte. “He has truly inspired generations of young artists to emerge, and they are now taking their place as we – my generation of Indian artists – join the geezer class and are reaching their dotage.”

In addition to his work at USD, Day served on the South Dakota Arts Council, was a member of the South Dakota Capitol Beautification Commission and was a recipient of the South Dakota Governor’s Award for Outstanding Support for the Arts by an Individual.

However, it may be as a teacher that Day is best remembered – even by those who never took one of his classes.

USD President James W. Abbott recalled a class named Adventure in the Arts, which was always filled with students “who didn’t want to be there.

“At the time, it was seen as one of those awful things you had to do,” Abbott said. “I don’t know if I really knew it then, but later ... what I really remember was the time I was listening to him teach and I saw a student have an ‘Ah-ha moment.’”

There’s nothing better than seeing a student suddenly become engaged and think, “I get it,” Abbott said.



**John A. Day, who served as dean of USD’s College of Fine Arts from 1980 through 2004, addresses the last summer commencement exercise of the university held in July 2009. (Photo by David Lias)**

“John had a way of doing that,” Abbott said. “It wasn’t just his ability to teach, to instruct. It was also his ability to convey wonderful enthusiasm in a subject that perhaps – at least in general courses – a certain number of students didn’t even particularly want to grasp.”

Cory Knedler, chair of the USD Department of Art and a former student of Day, said he was just as helpful to students outside of the classroom.

“As an administrator, guiding director and professor, John was a moving target for students looking to ask him one more question,” Knedler said.

For his part, Day always made time and devoted his

full attention to whomever needed help.

“It was then that you really understood how much he cared about each of us,” Knedler said.

Wayne Knutson, dean emeritus, College of Fine Arts, said Day was the same way with everybody, from the president of the university to the custodians.

“(He was) a tireless administrator who chose to be the college’s servant,” Knutson said. “With the most gentle pushing and shoving, and the most

remarkable patience, he got the consensus of the faculty to support him in his quest for the college’s collegiality, maturation, sophistication and vision.

...

“He would go anywhere and do anything to prove the relevancy of the arts,” he said.

Knutson said he was often asked how Day was able to do so much with his time.

“My answer? Because he loved every minute of it,” Knutson said.

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