

Distinguished Faculty Award

Reflections From Alumni, Alumnae, Colleagues, Family and Friends

June 2, 2017

One of the few faculty who embraced the changes of the late 60s and supported students trying to make sense of the world around them.

- Robin O'Donnell '70, Berkley, Calif.

Congratulations, Jim. I am sure you don't recall this, but we first "met" when I was in a Western Civ class you were teaching in 1967-68. That experience nailed down my decision to be an English major for two reasons - your love of literature and language was infectious and I wanted to be part of additional Jim Crenner classes. Those classes, including a wonderful independent study on Mark Twain, remain among my favorite HWS memories - as well being introduced to gin and Angostura bitters... but that is another story. Thank you for sharing your love of literature and a friendship that continues to this day - and thank you for sharing the same with Molly. Good luck and good health.

- Peace. Todd Rosenthal '71, P'11, West Hartford, Conn.

My best memory is coming into class and Prof. Crenner asking us who had liked the poem *Pied Beauty* by Gerald Hopkins. Perhaps one or two people raised their hands. He looked at us calmly and said, "That's because you don't understand it." He spent the rest of the class unfolding it so that by the end of the time, we all had become caught up in its imagery and meaning. It's been my response for years now, whenever my students said they didn't like something, or whenever I feel an aversion to something. I have learned to look to understand as much as I can. By caring so much about the subjects he taught and about the students he taught, Crenner gave students a passion not only for their content but also the desire to embody the same level of passion in whatever we felt drawn to do in the future.

- Jane Abritis Herbst '72, Ronkonkoma, N.Y.

Jim Crenner (and others) were instrumental in bridging the intellectual tradition of the Colleges and the Western Civ tradition and the ferment of the seventies. They were important anchors and resources to many students finding their way in complicated times.

- James Roistacher '72, Boston, N.Y.

Jim Crenner touched many students through his teaching and example as an active poet. He achieved national recognition for Hobart and William Smith via the poetry journal he co-founded, *Seneca Review*.

- Sally Webster '74, Geneva, N.Y.

Jim, thank you for the poetry, the ping pong at Houghton House (sorry about your wrist), and our time on the tennis court. Your friendship is one of my most cherished college memories.

- Beth Toher Hudson '75, Geneva, N.Y.

I took an American poetry class with Jim Crenner at 8:00 a.m. during winter term and often walked to class in the snow. I remember the smell of coffee mixed together with the melody of Whitman (and other great poet's) and Jim's passion for language. Jim 'lit' my love of poetry.

- Marjorie Scheer '75, Durham, N.C.

I still remember lectures Jim Crenner gave when I was a student. He encouraged my appreciation of literature. Jim helped me understand the relationship between poetry and visual arts; I would never would have thought to connect *The Wasteland* by T.S. Elliot and *Nude Descending a Staircase* until he pointed out the connection. And, I still remember it this many years later.

- Mary M. Collins '78, Wilmette, Ill.

I'm writing on behalf of my dad, Professor English of Emeritus Roger L. Farrand '49, P'78 and recently recognized distinguished faculty award recipient. He asked me to write for him a 'formula' for Jim Crenner:

Roger credited Jim with being formidable in any discourse and submitted a formula:

$$\frac{\text{Mark Twain} + \text{evolution}}{\text{iPad}} = \text{Jim Crenner}$$

(Mark Twain plus evolution over iPad equals Jim Crenner)

I don't recall what course(s) I took from Jim during my Hobart years (1974 to 1978), but I do recall his respect for the craft and much later when he said I was a better writer than I was a radio guy. He was right.

- All the best, Matt Farrand '78, Lewisburg, Pa.

Crenner was an inspired educator dedicated to his students. He sharpened minds through multi-disciplinary teaching and applied a critical yet kind discipline on students' work. He shared a love of teaching with all students.

- James F. Brennan '79, Oswego, N.Y.

My favorite professor by far. I took a poetry class and ran back home raving to my friends. The following trimester we all took short story and were hooked! Your passion for prose was addictive. I always think of and recall your prescient statement (paraphrased of course) that one day the class "reading" will be like Latin - up a creaky staircase, with cobwebs and no one will take it. OXOX

- Bettina Stammen '87, New York, N.Y.

Having recently attended an alumni trip to Rome, I had the pleasure of getting to know Jim. He is delightful and an amazingly generous individual who is dedicated to continuous learning and sharing of his knowledge. He is simply a fantastic individual.

- George P. Dilworth '88, Roswell, Ga.

I first met Jim when he was a reviewer of my baccalaureate essay thesis. He absolutely hated my thesis attempt and was not shy about letting me know! To this day, I still re-read his hilariously biting comments:

... strength of this thesis - "the title" ...
... weakness - "everything else - it is sheer gibberish"!

While I was somewhat destroyed, I was determined to recover credibility with my harsh critic! In the end, Jim's frankness was the jolt I needed to not only improve my essay, but to sharpen my overall cognitive skills as a student, and develop a lifelong love for literary analysis. I went on to work with Jim through several independent study courses and majored in English stronger with his tutelage. He still serves as my benchmark for tough love - the high standards he expected of HWS students, were clearly reinforced by his dedication to teaching and his literary passion. He remains a pivotal professor (and person) in my formative years. This Distinguished Faculty Award is well deserved!

PS: I recently shared my essay thesis rejection comments with my daughter, a high school freshmen, navigating constructive criticism from teachers. Juxtaposed them with later positive independent study feedback really helped show the evolution of what happens when really good teachers push us past our comfort level, to a place they see we are capable of reaching, though we cannot see it yet!

- Whitney Wolff '88, Talkeetna, Alaska

I'm not bragging when I say my memory is the worst. It's not something I'm proud of, but if I don't offer up this confession I'm likely to embarrass myself (like I did when I asked an old classmate, found on Facebook after many years, who he'd taken to prom and, well...yea, you guessed it. The only thing I remember from that night is my dress, even after being reminded of my date). So when I was 36, I thought it meaningful when my boyfriend at the time, a Wall Street lawyer named Bunny, introduced me to his AA sponsor and suddenly ZING came a jolt of recognition; without skipping a beat, I knew that man was the husband of Baby Jane Holzer. The Baby Jane...her husband, Leonard, sitting across from me in a booth at a diner on the Upper East Side, eating a grilled cheese sandwich! I squealed all the way through lunch like a teeny-bopper meeting her idol, as if I were meeting Tom Wolf himself. See, Baby Jane Holzer was the star of the most inspiring piece of writing I've ever read. It blew my mind and threw open a portal to a whole new way of working with words. I felt unleashed. Suddenly these new sentences poured out of me, so easy like pop-pop-pop-pop-pop, dump them out and just let them land where they fall and hey guess what, in this New Journalism class you can get an A for that! The vivid shock of reading Girl of the Year set it as a fixture floating perpetually at the top of my shoddy memory bank, always gleaming, always glossy, never buried under the sticky dust that coats most of my mental clutter. It was glorious and gave me a foundation for my own creative written expression. I can't be grateful enough for that. At graduation I was given an award for the essay I wrote for that class...without question my proudest academic achievement. It was a true story about being raped at a frat party (as a high school student in Ohio), and telling it should have been terrifying... except that now I was given a form through which to tell it that felt safe to be real and honest. I wrote a damned good story, but much more than that, I wrote my story. Reflecting on my life as a

“rape survivor” (blech), I can see exactly when and where and how I came through to the side of healthy, of having-dealt-with-it, indelibly and completely. My days at William Smith gradually ate away at the searing, scarring belief that I had deserved what had happened to me, but it was specifically writing and sharing that essay in that class that finally let me own my experience with real strength. In particular, it was your steady compassion and encouragement – and always good humor – that gave me the guts to stand up and tell the world (“the world”) that I’d been raped and I wasn’t going to feel guilty about it. So not only did your guidance lead me to my voice as a writer, that guidance quite literally led me to.....well, to me. Literally me. I would be profoundly different if not for your great teaching and genuine friendship. And even after years of Friday lunch of poached eggs and a game of pool at Sweet Sue’s Diner, even decades into middle age...I still, STILL can’t call you “Jim”. Of all the people in the entire world, I hold you and you alone in such regard that I feel nearly incapable of addressing you – or even referring to you – by your first name.

- Niki Korda '90, Dorset, Ontario

Professor Crenner is an impressive, inspirational teacher. My last year at HWS (I graduated in 1991), I took a class with Professor Crenner on Dickinson, Poe, and Frost. We read the three writers closely and carefully. In our classroom discussions, Professor Crenner posed probing questions. Years later, I still remember how he guided us through the terrifying implications of Robert Frost's foreboding worldview. He also was extremely generous with his time. I was working with Professor David Weiss on an honors thesis in creative writing. Several times Professor Crenner met with me to discuss the poems and short stories I was writing, offering very helpful suggestions and encouragement. In addition to the particular ideas he shared, the fact that he took my writing so seriously was enormously heartening. I learned a great deal from him and remain very grateful.

- David Caplan '91, Columbus, Ohio

I did an independent study with Professor Crenner and he was a great mentor throughout the process.

- Katherine Howard Marvel '91, Marion, Mass.

James Crenner was an excellent teacher of English, who made the subject come alive.

- Jennifer Flaherty Schultz '92, Red Bank, N.J.

When I arrived at William Smith College, I swore I wouldn't be an English major, but taking Professor Crenner's class changed my mind. I enjoyed the way he took apart the poetry we read and delved deeper into the readings than I had before. Thank you for opening my eyes to the beauty of the written word.

- Jennifer Keller '93, Fairfield, Conn.

Professor Crenner was my advisor from 1989-1993. We weren't able to declare a major until spring term of sophomore year and I said to Professor Crenner, earlier in my sophomore year, "Why can't I just declare it? I already know what I want. I want to be an English major and teach high school English." He cheerfully said, "You're 19! How do YOU know what you want?" I believe I responded with mock indignation and felt he didn't know me well enough to know how sure I was. It turns out, a few years later, I would trade teaching for mental health. I have been a therapist for almost 20 years, and when I'm working with a young person who is considering what to do with their life, I often share that story. Thank you, Professor Crenner, for the great story and for your prescient wisdom.

- Jennifer Kozlowski Pietrzak '93, Henderson, Nev.

I was an English major when I attended Hobart from 1989 to 1993. My father was terminally ill my last year of school. I couldn't be more grateful to the English department at that time for their love and support during an incredibly difficult time in my personal life. I will always look back at my last year at Hobart fondly because of the support I received from faculty and advisors. While losing my father was difficult, the memories and experiences I gained from the Colleges will last a lifetime.

- Geoffrey Todebush '93, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Professor Crenner taught my freshman seminar and was also my first advisor. He was responsible for helping me understand to develop my thoughts and ideas but instilled a curiosity that helped me through my years at HWS. He was always very helpful and I always appreciated his guidance. I saw him help many other students as well and appreciate everything he did for us.

- Ramon F. Baez '00, New York, N.Y.

I took "Poe, Dickinson, and Frost" with Professor Crenner, and he taught me the joy of having a poem memorized. He would recite poems to the class from memory with so much bliss, he demonstrated how joyful poetry and language can be. He said when you have poems memorized, you can take them out and turn them over in your mind anytime you need to. I have taken this life lesson with me since then, and have enjoyed carrying poems in my mind wherever I go, because of him. Thank you for this gift, Professor Crenner.

- Nina Moats Prater '04, Cedarville, Arz.

I first met Jim Crenner when I was visiting HWS in the summer of 2000. HWS was among 5 universities I was interested in attending. While I was certainly drawn to its idyllic campus and gorgeous architecture, it was only after meeting Jim as an introduction to the English department that I knew it was the school I would apply early decision to. Later, when I found myself in his creative writing workshop freshman year, I understood that I was being taught by a truly extraordinary man. He could recite poems on the spot and his knowledge and passion for language and literature were inspiring; his critique of my writing was always honest and astute. I enrolled in several of his classes during those four years and I relished every single one of them. Many of the novels, stories, and poems we read I was already familiar with; however, Jim had a way of inspiring new, complex analysis of them and I fell in love with some of my favorite authors all over again. More than this, though, Jim was one of five very special English professors who, after a particularly torturous and dark year for me, offered me their hands and quite literally saved my life. Jim is incredibly kind, wise, and generous. He is more to me than part of the reason I went to HWS and part of the reason I stayed; he is a significant part of the reason I am a writer, mother, and teacher and deeply grateful to be all three.

- Jessie Sobey '05, Fairbanks, Alaska

Jim was my advisor during my first two years at the Colleges, which were his final years at the Colleges. He admitted me into his creative writing course the spring of that first year and, as the first writer I'd worked with, gave me my true instruction in the craft of writing, as well as my first taste of criticism, which has influenced my aesthetic immeasurably. Jim's good humor in conveying that criticism, and his simultaneous refusal to pull punches on lazy or imprecise language, sticks with me as much as the course mantra: writing is rewriting. I remember Jim taking me to lunch to discuss my work, even after his retirement, and returning my manuscript pages inked up and down in his red, felt-tipped cursive, each note full of encouragement, insight, and wit. Jim exemplifies the kind of faculty commitment I encountered elsewhere on campus, which extends infinitely beyond the classroom and which, I can't help but think, Jim helped forge during his long tenure at the Colleges.

- Andrew Wickenden '09, Climax, Mich.

I only took one class with Professor Crenner and Professor Ciletti but I remember what they taught, and the passion with which they taught, more clearly than almost any other professors. My class with Professor Crenner was freshman fall and my first English course at HWS. It's not a coincidence that after this I ended up an English major. James Crenner's knowledge is intimidating and every student should have an experience with a Professor of his intelligence at some point in their education. Elena Ciletti made me love art history. I'd taken art history courses previously and always enjoyed them. Professor Ciletti caused me to try to switch my major senior year to art history. At least once a year I look up Art History graduate programs and try to figure out how an eight year Latin student could swing the French or Italian language requirement. Learning from Professor Ciletti was one of the greatest gifts I had while at HWS.

- Patricia Stacey '10, White Lake, Mich.

James Crenner was my First Year Seminar professor and advisor. He saw potential in me and pushed me to succeed as just a First Year - and I feel that my ultimate academic success was influenced by my experience with him. He respected my mind and wouldn't allow me to churn out a product that wasn't engaging with an important idea - one of the most valuable lessons I've ever learned.

- Merrill Amos '11, Brighton, Mass.

Professor Crenner was my dad's writing professor in 1970 (Todd Rosenthal '71), and mine in 2007-2008, and we were both equally as inspired by his energy and creativity. He pushed me to be the best writer I possibly could be, without making any of the assignments seem like work. I will forever be grateful for Professor Crenner and so glad I got to share such a wonderful man with my dad!

- Molly Rosenthal '11, Washington, DC

Jim and I taught together in one of the first multi-disciplinary General Education programs in the 1976 - 77 academic year, a year in which Jim received the faculty prize for teaching. It was he who taught me the beauty of poetry as that course played out. For Jim, poetry was “the song he sang and singing made” (you’ll recognize this, Jim) as his presentations unfolded – poet as poem – a remarkable standard.

- Professor of Education Emeritus John W. Burns, Ovid, N.Y.

May 6th, 2017

Writing to you from rain drenched Rochester, New York

Dear Professor Crenner,

The privilege of being your student was knowing that as hard as I worked, as dedicated as I was to crafting my words on paper, you would be unflinchingly, constructively critical as you weighed every word, every punctuation mark, every moment of dialogue.

Your energy and care as you led our classes in a circle of thought and voices was always where I wanted to be.

Your unerring writer's voice and eye, your willingness to be an editor who cared about every single assignment coming your way, was inspiring as a student.

I also had the privilege of listening and learning in Professor Ciletti's phenomenal art history classes, too, and I still remember her reading aloud your poetry in our class, her pride and love for your words on paper inspiring.

I still have all of the papers I wrote for the many classes I took with you, from memoir style stories to poetry, from papers examining the impact of Huckleberry Finn's journey to Edith Wharton's heroines, from essays examining the poetry of William Carlos Williams to creative short fiction. Your red scrawl writing is part of a conversation you're having with my words on paper, and that critique was always welcome and invigorating.

You knew how to challenge. I was proud of my words.

I have been teaching since I graduated from William Smith College in 1992: from college students at Syracuse University in both the Writing Program and the Classics Department to middle school students (for a brief span of time) and, for most of my 25 year career, working with high school English students at Pittsford Sutherland High School in Pittsford, New York.

I fell in love with teaching writing and literature, and both you and Professor Ciletti are a part of the reason I have so much fun making a difference in my chosen career: because the two of you made a difference for me when I was your student.

Each year, I read Mark Twain, F Scott Fitzgerald, Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Alice Walker, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edith Wharton and Zora Neale Hurston; I read Ken Kesey, Colson Whitehead, Elie Wiesel and Kurt Vonnegut, Emily Dickinson, Ray Bradbury and June Jordan, Toni Morrison and Langston Hughes; I teach Ernest Hemingway, Charles Dickens and William Shakespeare, JD Salinger and August Wilson, Sandra Cisneros and Harper Lee, Jeannette Walls and David Sedaris, Thomas Hardy, Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton, Homer and George Orwell, and so many other voices that refuse to stay silent.

As these poets and artisans-in-words crowd my classrooms, practically invisible except for the way in which they consistently escape from the pages of the stories they've composed, you will witness how their journeys inspire and challenge my student writers.

Just like you introduced poets and writers to me with such enthusiasm and I found myself in their stories, my writers and readers and

thinkers are on their way, too.

You should know, Professor Crenner, that as crowded as my full classes may be with 29 students, on the third floor of our forever sweltering building, your influence is there, too, in the way that I respond, in depth, to my writers.

Thank you for choosing to be a Teacher.

With appreciation,

Marni Rabinowitz '92
Pittsford Sutherland HS English Department
55 Sutherland Street
Pittsford, New York 14534

Distinguished Faculty Award Presentation Remarks By Niki Korda '90

From the moment I was asked to present this award, I've been thrashing around in my head trying to figure out how on earth I could possibly relate the profound impact Jim Crenner has had on his students over the course of his career, and to do so without sounding cliché, no less! Excuse me if I get carried away, but I've found there's no overstating Professor Crenner's deservingness of this award. It's easy, yet time-consuming, to list his many distinctions and accomplishments, beginning with his MFA in Creative Writing from the prestigious Iowa Writer's Workshop, to the many fellowships, awards, titles and prizes such as membership in the American Academy of Poets and the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, culminating in his appointment to the Colleges' eminent John Milton Potter Chair in 2000. Along the way he co-founded and edited the Seneca Review, an internationally influential and renowned literary journal; authored four books of poetry, a novel and over 50 submissions in various magazines and anthologies; and served on over a dozen community committees and service groups. Oh yea, he was also a teacher.

His CV is 4 pages long, and lists every work, every award, every publication. But it does nothing to capture the reason we are honoring Jim Crenner today.

Reading the reflections sent in by past students, one notices a pattern. We recognized that we were taking English classes, to learn to analyze fine literature and craft sophisticated compositions, but the lasting lessons we took from those classes diverged from the curriculum into much deeper domain – personal growth – that can be neither

measured nor graded.

The professor recites a poem, and the class discusses its meaning; the students are exposed to a new piece of writing and maybe a new factoid from history or a tidbit of philosophy. Maybe they're thinking about words or grammar in a new way. Maybe they're inspired to write something creative of their own. This is no small feat but it's the least we expect from a good teacher. When you have a Great Teacher, however ~ a teacher like Crenner ~ those students also learn what it means to be genuinely impassioned by art and by life. They witness how fulfilling intellectual curiosity and creativity can be. Even deeper, they feel the powerful drive to inspire others.

Crenner used his platform as an English professor to teach whatever lesson any of us needed to learn, as long as we were open to it. There was no end to his encouragement to dig deeper, go farther, seek answers, be brave, be braver.

With insight and dedication, he not only literally helped us solve our problems, personal or academic, but in the process he promoted self-confidence simply by being so respectful, attentive and caring. This legendary, brilliant and almost scary professor wouldn't be spending his valuable time on me if I didn't have anything to offer, right...? For me personally, Crenner was the first highly respected adult in my life to treat me like a respected adult, and by the end of my first course with him, for the first time in my life, I saw myself as a serious student with real capabilities and academic potential. I didn't always believe him but he never lost faith in me, even when I couldn't figure out why. I can't overstate how much his support, even across the distance of years, has meant to me throughout my life.

There's an old saying about education being the sum of everything you remember after you've forgotten what they taught you in school. To be honest, I don't remember most of the books I read in school. I don't have a single line of poetry memorized and I don't drop references to Fitzgerald or Updike at dinner parties. But I did get one helluva a great education from you, Professor Crenner. I learned critical thinking. I learned moral rectitude. I learned strength of character. I learned self-confidence. I learned kindness.

And this is about the greatest honor of my life, to be the one who gets to say thank you, on behalf of thousands of people who were lucky enough to land in your classroom and get that kind of education, one we'll never forget.