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DEDICATION: Charlie Slavin [1954-2012]

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DEDICATION



Charlie Slavin
[1954–2012]

BY NORM WEINER, SUNY OSWEGO

Charlie Slavin is dead, dammit. (If you're expecting a hagiography, you didn't know Charlie.) It seems so unfair, to go at such a young age. Unfair to his family, unfair to his students, unfair to his colleagues, unfair to his friends. And certainly unfair to Charlie.

Most folks in NCHC "knew" Charlie from sightings at our national conferences. He was tough to miss—omnipresent and outspoken, bushy beard in full flow. What people saw was the public Charlie, either playing Mother Hen to his many students and basking in their accomplishments, or being the voice of contention in meetings and sessions. Were these the real Charlie? If you asked him, he'd look over his glasses at you with a sly smile and say, "Yeah." He knew how most people saw him, and he got a kick out of it.

There was, of course, a lot of reality to the public Charlies. While we all care about our students, Charlie's dedication to his students was way beyond most of us. To put it simply, everything he did in his honors work—everything—was about his students. He was determined to see that they got every opportunity, that they pushed themselves towards excellence, that they be encouraged when they stumbled, and that they be celebrated for their triumphs. He brought busloads of students to NCHC conferences because he believed it was important that they be exposed to a wider world of scholarship and that, in this forum, they come to realize what they were capable of. He didn't just send his students on their own; he led them, he pushed them, he guided them. And I'm not speaking metaphorically. Charlie was hands-on.

Then there was the contentious Charlie. Charlie loved playing devil's advocate. (Was it really "playing"?) He saw things rationally—he was, after all, a

mathematician—and was genuinely perplexed and annoyed when others were irrational or ignored unpleasant truths. Moreover, Charlie didn't suffer fools gladly. Or, more accurately, he didn't suffer fools at all. He had a reputation as a curmudgeon, full of bluff and bluster. Yet he saw himself, as the Quaker phrase has it, speaking truth to power, doing his best to make the world a better place. At many meetings, Charlie was the thorn in our side—and our conscience.

But some people knew Charlie beyond these personas. He was an extremely devoted family man. He was surprisingly modest. (He'd be embarrassed by all the tributes.) He was very considerate of other people's feelings. (When he and his wife were naming their son, he called to tell me that they had decided to give him the same name as my son because they liked it so much—and he didn't want us to be offended by the duplication.)

What some of us will remember most fondly is that Charlie liked to relax with a good drink at the end of the day. Charlie's drink of choice was gin—simple straight gin. No fancy, yuppie tags like Sapphire or No. 10. Just good gin. We spent many hours over the years sipping, telling jokes, trading stories. One conversation comes to mind. We were deploring the rise of the “new martinis” like appletinis, chocolatinis, and the like. Someone asked the wise assemblage, “If these drinks have no gin and no vermouth, what makes them ‘martinis?’” Charlie thought for a moment, and, being the philosopher-mathematician, had the answer: “They're served in a martini glass.”

Here's to you, Charlie: gone too soon. We miss you.