

KATHY OVERHULSE SMITH

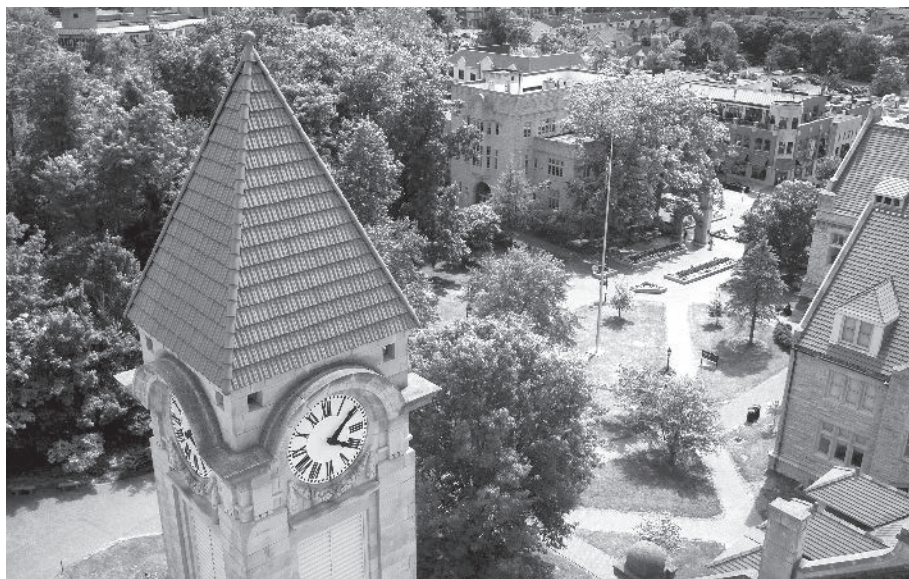
Carpe Diem!

Just over 30 years ago, Robin Williams exhorted students of literature everywhere with this *cri de coeur* in the hit film *Dead Poets Society*. Almost immediately, Kathy Overhulse Smith responded to this directive as though it were spoken to her directly by accepting employment with Indiana University. The rest is history (and therefore rich in irony).

Smith had recently defended her dissertation on the rhetorical strategies of Renaissance *carpe diem* poetry, so presumably she knew the risks.

“Had we but world enough, and time,” we could linger over the many extraordinary administrative virtues that Smith deployed over the past three decades in service not only of her department but of the College of Arts and Sciences. Begin, as we all must, with teaching assignments. Though departments shrink more and more, there was a time not long ago when each semester saw literally hundreds of classroom assignments in English alone, and each of those assignments required a time and place to meet. To manage the scheduling for scores of academics every semester, and never once encounter so much as a single word of displeasure or complaint—well, that would be unheard of. Complaints there were, as complaints there will always be; but regardless of the source or form of complaint, explanations (where necessary) were offered, adjustments (where possible) were made. Throughout it all, a genial aura suffused the department, and its every member grew familiar with Kathy’s incantatory spells, and their magical charm: “No biggie. We’ll work it out. It’s all good.”

And, indeed, it was (always) “no biggie.” It was worked out. All remained good. For decades, the administrative burden of her colleagues was considerably lightened by the unfailingly pleasant labor of Professor Smith, who not only tended to much of the necessary (and often thankless) labor on which all departments, especially large ones, depend, she did so in ways that invariably made those whose life she was making easier feel better about the work that they were doing. Her good humor and good sense, whether negotiating with the College, or mentoring graduate instructors, or mediating student complaints, or helping to shape and implement the ever-changing world of curricular



requirements, or simply managing the most basic and necessary of tasks—putting students and instructor into the same space at the same time, so learning can occur—invariably made English a better department, and a better workplace. She had—and continues to have—an uncanny knack for making others feel better, even as we sink from crisis to crisis.

“Gather ye [final exam booklets] while ye may,” for time is still a-flying. Every course ends with a final exam, and every teacher must one day grade a final assignment. Professor Smith was known primarily to her colleagues in her administrative capacity, and she was known primarily to graduate students as a mentor and administrator; but she was known to undergraduate students as an outstanding teacher: in intensive writing courses, in courses core to the major, and of course in Renaissance and early 17th-century poetry. No administrative labor affects faculty more directly than that which administers, deliberates, and coordinates general education requirements; this labor she now is allowed to hand to others. No support for graduate students is more important than the support we offer, first in mentoring their professional development and then in attesting to their accomplishments and potential through letters of recommendation. Many, many students have benefitted from the time and energy Professor Smith brought to visiting classrooms, mentoring and supervising associate instructors, and most of all from

the many scores of letters of recommendation she wrote on their behalf. For those who measure a department’s value by the placement of its graduate students, it is worth reflecting how many successful careers have been supported at the outset by the labor of one who never taught them in a graduate classroom. This labor I am sure she will hand off with mixed emotions. And I am just as confident that the labor of undergraduate teaching will be set down not without reluctance. Her course evaluations were always among the department’s most stellar, in a department that prides itself on the quality of undergraduate instruction. Majors frequently identified her as “the best teacher I have ever had.” So it is no surprise that English majors recently selected her as the professor whom they most wanted to address their class at graduation.

For all these reasons, and many more (too many to detail), the College correctly recognized her with a well-earned accolade as a culminating recognition of her distinguished career at Indiana University. The Morley Career Distinguished Teaching Award for non-tenure track faculty is now named in her honor, as the Kathy Overhulse Smith Teaching Award. It is an honor richly deserved and a fitting culmination to an outstanding career. She will be missed by her colleagues.

Romayne Dorsey

Richard Nash