



Kurt Jenne

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Over the weekend a former faculty member, Kurt Jenne, passed away. He had just turned 68.



Kurt was a wonderful colleague who took disability retirement when a memory disorder made it impossible for him to continue working.

Kurt came to the Institute of Government after spending a year at Princeton University as a Fellow in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He had served for the immediately preceding three years as Chapel Hill's Town Manager. Kurt started with Chapel Hill as a planning intern in 1970 while getting his Master of Regional Planning and he worked in various planning and community development roles until he was appointed town manager in 1975.

In a letter to John Sanders (Director of the Institute) in 1979 about his career options after his year at Princeton, Kurt wrote that "[t]he Institute of Government is an institution in which I have been most interested for a long time. *I would like to find out whether my skills and experience are appropriate and valuable to what the Institute will be doing in the near future . . .*" Incredibly valuable as it would turn out. Kurt returned to Chapel Hill to get his PhD in City and Regional Planning, and he worked at the Institute in various roles until he finished in 1984 and became a full-time faculty member.

He carved out important areas of work during his time with the Institute. As a former manager Kurt was a perfect choice to work with local government managers, and he did it brilliantly. The managers respected him as one of their own, and they also respected him for his knowledge, good judgment, and willingness to give them candid feedback. Kurt helped local governments with the process of recruiting and evaluating their top managers, and he helped many others design and implement strategic planning processes.

Kurt was especially skillful in facilitating governing board-manager retreats, which he seemed to enjoy more than almost any other work. He liked being out in the field and helping people in tangible ways, and he enjoyed the give-and-take of a retreat. They always seemed to recharge his batteries. He would joke sometimes about having just returned from a retreat in "Burning Privy, North Carolina," one of his colorful ways of saying an out-of-the-way small town. In truth, he loved doing the work and he respected all of the people he encountered.

A commitment to public service was one of Kurt's core values and it was evident in so many ways beyond his role as a faculty member with the Institute. He was enormously proud of his military service in the U.S. Army, including long service as a colonel in the reserves. His official resume also proudly listed his service as Chief Judge, Orange County Board of Elections, Lincoln Precinct. He took those responsibilities seriously and always worked at the polls on election days. Kurt was a person who carried his weight as a faculty member, and his practical focus and strong work ethic meant that he was called upon regularly to serve on important internal committees.

Kurt was smiling and upbeat whenever I saw him, and he had a distinctive walk that reflected his boundless energy. I have a vivid image of seeing Kurt in the distance on many occasions as he walked toward our building from Woolen Gym. It looked as if he had springs on the bottoms of his



feet as he bounded skyward with each stride, his arms pumping in a steady rhythm. It was purposeful and somehow joyful all at the same time. For me that walk reflected Kurt's personality.

He had a generous and optimistic spirit. Notwithstanding his experience in the Army and the University, two organizations that place importance on categorizing people by rank, Kurt treated everyone with the greatest respect. He was no elitist. I particularly remember Kurt spending time with our support staff in ways that communicated to everyone that they were valued colleagues. He was instrumental in promoting a culture of collegiality that embraced everyone who was a part of the organization.

I still remember the day I discovered that he was experiencing some kind of memory disorder. I had just received a letter from an upset county commissioner who was complaining that Kurt had not followed through in scheduling an important meeting with his board. It was totally uncharacteristic and so I went up to his office to see what had happened. Kurt's office always was well organized with neatly stacked files and everything in its place. The only difference this time was that he had Post-It notes stuck all over the place, very neatly, to remind him of deadlines, appointments, and anything else that he might need to remember. He realized that something was wrong and he had a strategy for working around it. We pieced together that the county commissioner probably had called and then Kurt promptly forgot about it before he could write anything down.

Kurt still had the military discipline that allowed him to complete a PhD while working at the Institute, but he was losing the memory needed to make sense of the neatly organized rows of information. He took disability retirement about ten years ago once it became clear that he could no longer do the work that he loved so much. His memory gradually and relentlessly deteriorated from that time forward. Notwithstanding that his dementia was arbitrary and unfair and maddening, Kurt never felt sorry for himself. Each time I saw him over the years he was smiling and upbeat.

I last saw Kurt about a month ago at the residential care facility where he was living in Chapel Hill. He no longer recognized me and he didn't seem to connect to anything I talked about. At the same time, however, it was easy to see the old Kurt inside. He smiled and he talked in the same upbeat way that I had seen so many times over the years. His memory had failed him, but his kind and generous personality had not diminished. It continued to shine brightly.

The following invitation is from Kurt's children and Margaret Henderson. They all loved and cared for Kurt. Margaret has been a source of support for Kurt and inspiration for those of us who have watched her handle their hard path together with a special grace. It was Kurt's great fortune that they found each other.

Kurt Jenne



March 22, 1944 — March 24, 2012

What: A purely informal gathering to acknowledge the passing of Kurt Jenne and celebrate his presence in our lives.

Food and drinks will be provided.

Who: Anyone who wants to come is welcome.

When: Wednesday, March 28, 2012, from 4:00-7:00 PM, come-and-go

Where: Bowbarr, 705 West Rosemary Street, Carrboro, NC 967-9725

There will be a memorial service for Kurt later on in the spring.

In lieu of flowers, the family asks that contributions be made to The Charles House in Carrboro, an adult day care facility that provided valuable support and guidance in the last years of Kurt's life.

<http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/the-birth-of-carrboros-bowbarr/Content?oid=1330481>