Suffolk University Newsletter (SUN), vol. 32, no. 5, 2005

Suffolk University Office of Public Affairs

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Michael R. Ronayne, Jr.
1937-2005

Dean Emeritus Michael R. Ronayne, Jr., who for more than 30 years led the College of Arts and Sciences, died Sunday, July 17, 2005, at age 68 following a long illness.

Michael Ronayne began teaching at Suffolk University's Beacon Hill campus in 1966. After five years as a professor of chemistry, he became the youngest dean in the University's history at age 34.

Under Dean Ronayne's leadership, Suffolk's College of Arts and Sciences significantly increased the number and variety of its undergraduate and graduate programs; many departments and programs were accredited; and technological advances were embraced. The New England School of Art & Design came under the umbrella of the College of Arts and Sciences; and affiliations were established with institutions of higher learning around the world. Dean Ronayne also supported the University's decision to establish campuses in Madrid, Spain, and Dakar, Senegal, along with satellite campuses in Eastern Massachusetts.

Dean Ronayne once said that he particularly enjoyed watching students grow and prosper in the college, then move on to lead productive lives. He felt that Suffolk's focus on teaching and the ease of interaction between faculty and students helped bring out the best in the students.

Dean Ronayne gave much to Suffolk, and the University played an important role in his life in many ways. Perhaps most significant was that he met his wife

A Special Issue in Remembrance of

Michael R. Ronayne, Jr.
Dean Emeritus

Dean Ronayne smiles proudly with daughter, Michelle, and wife, Joanne, during his celebration of 30 years as dean. (Photo by John Gilliady)

Dean Emeritus Michael R. Ronayne, Jr., always will be remembered as one of those "special" members of the Suffolk University family, a man who spent more than half of his life impacting students, faculty and staff in a way that they will never forget.

For nearly four decades, he loved how and where he made his living. Suffolk University was his home away from home, a place where he felt comfortable and in control. Working at Suffolk was not Michael Ronayne's job; it was his passion.

“He was always concerned about the people around him,” said Suffolk Law Professor Herb Lemelman, who began his career at Suffolk, along with Dean Ronayne, in 1966. "Besides being a wonderful leader and administrator, he was a friendly, humble and outgoing guy. He was a Suffolk icon, a throwback to another era, and he believed in Suffolk from the bottom of his heart.”

Said Suffolk Law Associate Dean John Deliso, “Mike was not only a good friend of mine, but also a terrific colleague. Whatever he did, he did with the best interest in mind of Suffolk University and Suffolk University Law School as a whole enterprise. He is a real loss to our institution.”

President David J. Sargent knew Dean Ronayne as well as anyone and witnessed firsthand how this intelligent and driven individual helped build the College of Arts and Sciences.

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In Remembrance
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“Mike Ronayne was a remarkable dean who inspired students and faculty and molded the College by his demand for excellence,” said Sargent. “He was exceedingly bright, very funny and a steadfast friend to those who knew him. Over the years, he made incredible contributions, and he is the reason why the College is the great institution it is today.”

A POSITIVE LEADER
Beatrice Snow, chair of the Biology Department, has been employed at the University for 40 years and knew Dean Ronayne well. “I remember him when he was a chemistry professor, before he even became dean,” said Snow, a 1962 Suffolk alumna. “Mike was an excellent dean, who was very supportive and took Suffolk places because he pushed us. He was one of those people who had good vision and leadership qualities, as well as a dry sense of humor.”

Snow then paused for a moment, searching for the right words. “For the longest time, Suffolk has lived under this guardian angel, where they pick the right people in the right place at the right time,” she said. “Mike Ronayne was one of those people.”

Walter Johnson, chairman of the Physics Department, used words like “firm,” “fair” and “forthright” to describe Dean Ronayne. “Mike was a character,” said Johnson. “He wasn’t afraid to speak his mind, and I found that very refreshing. If he didn’t like something, you knew about it right away. However, he was also a good listener, and if you had a good argument, you had a chance. He was flexible like that, and he got things done.”

He was also known for bringing people closer together, particularly when they needed it most. On September 11, 2001, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, Dean Ronayne called all of his department chairs for a meeting to express their views about this horrific event. “It was just incredible,” said Susan Thayer, associate dean, CAS. “You got to listen to the perspective from a mathematician, a chemist, a historian and everyone else in the room. That’s the type of person who Mike Ronayne was.”

While continually maintaining his strong image as a highly respected administrator and educator, Dean Ronayne also demonstrated a humorous side, especially to those who knew him best.

“He was brilliant, kind, forgiving and funny,” said Andrea Ortisi, budget director, CAS, who spent 20 years working with Dean Ronayne. “He used to sing in the office, changing words to songs and making up goofy little ‘ditties.’ And you know how people say, ‘Give me a buzz when you have a chance.’ Well, sometimes the dean would come out of his office with a little piece of paper saying, ‘This is a buzz. I wish I kept that piece of paper.’

MENTOR & FATHER FIGURE
On a more serious note, Ortisi talked with heartfelt emotion about Dean Ronayne, who she says was adored by numerous people throughout the Suffolk campus—like a family member, an old friend or a good neighbor. “He was a true mentor; not just on the job, but also with real-life issues,” she said. “I remember when I first started working for him, he told me that even if I made a mistake I should not be afraid to tell him because it could be fixed.”

Melissa Gately, administrative associate in the CAS dean’s office, spent one year as Dean Ronayne’s assistant and looks back at that time with fond memories. “He was like a father figure to me,” said Gately, who has been employed at Suffolk for seven years. “He was very down-to-earth and easy to approach. He had that persona of being a tough guy, but that’s what he had to be in his position. But to those who knew him, he was a good friend who was easy to talk with.”
While conducting himself in a serious manner most of the time, Dean Ronayne knew exactly when to show his comedic side. “He had a certain kind of wit about him that he would use to his advantage when bargaining for the budget,” said Vice President and Treasurer Francis X. Flannery. “He surrounded himself with highly qualified people, and he would always fight to get them higher salaries.”

Dean Ronayne, a regular guy from the streets of Somerville, will always be considered a Suffolk pioneer. After becoming the youngest dean in the University’s history at 34, he continually looked for ways to provide his faculty with the necessary resources so they could best educate their students, the pulse of Suffolk’s existence.

“We’ve all benefited over the years with more faculty members and new programs because Dean Ronayne was always open for new ideas and growth for the school,” said Glen Eskedal, chair of Education and Human Services. “Suffolk was his life, and he did everything he could to make it better.”

**PLAYFUL SENSE OF HUMOR**

Marilyn Plotkins, Theatre Department chair, said that Dean Ronayne took a chance on her 25 years ago, and she is forever grateful. “He was a good, gentle and wise man,” she said. “He had a twinkle in his eyes and a wonderful sense of humor. He loved holding court in his office, and I have profited immensely from his sage advice. I was blessed to know him, work with him and be the recipient of his support.”

One of Dean Ronayne’s closest friends at Suffolk was Jim Nelson, the University’s longtime director of Athletics. “The dean’s start date at Suffolk was six months prior to my own, and even after more than three decades, he would forever remind me of the fact that he continued to have seniority over me,” laughed Nelson.

For the past 20 years, Nelson and Dean Ronayne shared a funny tradition. During the annual CAS faculty meeting in September, Nelson would present the dean with a gag gift. These various items included a miniature bust with a full-size head of John Wayne; a piñata of Don Quixote; and a poster of the movie, *Twins*, with the faces of Nelson and Dean Ronayne superimposed on the faces of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito.

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**Michael R. Ronayne, Jr., 1937-2005**

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Joanne (Rooney) when she worked in the Chemistry Department. They settled in Winchester with their daughter Michelle.

Dean Ronayne was born in Somerville. He received a BS in Chemistry from Boston College and a PhD in Physical Chemistry from the University of Notre Dame.

After serving as an associate professor at Providence College, he worked on NASA research projects as a staff scientist at Panametrics in Waltham. But, missing academia, he took what was meant to be a one-semester position at Suffolk University, then made his career here.

In 1983, Dean Ronayne ran for and won a seat on the Winchester School Committee, where he served for nine years, with two terms as chair. He also was an elected Winchester Town Meeting member for 15 years.

He had served on the executive board of directors of the Massachusetts Bay Marine Sciences Consortium. He was a member of the Society of Sigma Xi, The American Chemical Society, the Faraday Society and the American Association of University Professors, and he was listed in American Men and Women of Science, Outstanding Educators of America, Who’s Who in America and Who’s Who in American Education.

The University has established the Michael R. Ronayne, Jr., Centennial Scholarship in his memory. A memorial service will be held in October so that we may come together to pay tribute to this man who contributed so much to the University. •
Tribute to Dean Emeritus

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Said Nelson, “Mike would most often have a quizzical look as I incorporated some loosely connected symbolism of him to these gifts. But he never failed the following year to remind me: ‘What do you have in store for me in September?’

“I knew him as a man with great interests in all aspects of life and community at Suffolk University. His legacy is indeed established at Suffolk, and for this we are all grateful for his contributions and dedication to our University.”

Dean Ronayne met his wife, Joanne, while she also was an employee of Suffolk, and they formed a family bond with the school over the years, attending countless University functions together and later with their daughter, Michelle, a Suffolk alumna. “Mike was a very strong family man,” commented Thayer.

When Richard Torrisi arrived at Suffolk 12 years ago, the first person he met was Dean Ronayne, and he was immediately impressed. “After talking with him for awhile, I knew he was a very sharp guy who was committed to education,” said Torrisi, dean of graduate programs and associate dean, Sawyer School of Management. “But he also made me think that there must be something about Suffolk University that makes people so loyal and dedicated to this place. I had a lot of respect for the man, his candor and honesty.”

Suffolk Police Chief John Pagliarulo remembers Dean Ronayne as a friendly, supportive and reasonable guy who went above and beyond the call of duty. “He helped put Suffolk on the map,” said Pagliarulo.

“Dean Ronayne was and will always be a big part of the history of Suffolk University.

“Suffolk has a strong sense of family, and no matter how much we change, we don’t change, and that’s a good thing. I know when I’m at work, I feel right at home, and I know Mike felt the same way.”

**TRANSFORMATION OF COLLEGE**

In 2002, Suffolk conducted a first-ever capital campaign to raise funds devoted solely to the College of Arts and Sciences, while at the same time paying tribute to Dean Ronayne for his 30 years of service as an educator and leader. The spirited fundraising effort culminated with a festive victory celebration at the Copley Plaza Hotel in honor of Dean Ronayne, whose leadership, guidance and expertise helped transform Suffolk from a one-building operation when he first started to the comprehensive, global institution it is today.

“The dean’s long-term vision and leadership have moved us from a local institution to one of international reach and reputation,” said CAS Dean Kenneth Greenberg, who took the reins when Dean Ronayne retired. “It is because of Dean Ronayne that the College of Arts and Sciences retains the commitment to its founding ideals while undergoing unprecedented change and transformation.

“Suffolk’s mission of access and excellence is something that has been around for a long time, but Dean Ronayne embraced it and brought it to a new level. Suffolk has always taken pride in opening its doors to a diverse group of people and backgrounds and making certain that everyone receives the best education they possibly can. Dean Ronayne always felt that our students are our first priority.”

Greenberg mentioned that “College Dean” is one of the most difficult jobs in the University. Dean Ronayne’s fulfilling this role for 30 years is a great testament to his many outstanding skills and abilities.

“Mike Ronayne was an extraordinary leader with a powerful intellect and a kind and generous heart,” said Greenberg. “It was a pleasure and a privilege to work with him for 25 years. He never hesitated to make difficult but necessary decisions, and at the same time he treated everyone around him with great tenderness and care.”

Audrey Goldstein, associate professor and program director of Fine Arts at the New England School of Art and Design at Suffolk University, has been busy creating a bronze bust of Dean Ronayne. A few summers ago, the dean visited Goldstein a number of times to sit for her in one of the NESADSU studios. “He was very personable,” said Goldstein. “He talked a lot about the Red Sox and how things are changing at Suffolk. You could tell how much he really cared about the University.”

Goldstein says that Dean Ronayne was a good subject to portray, except when he began rattling off a few one-liners. “He was hysterical,” she said. “The only thing was when he laughed, he couldn’t sit still.”

Michael Ronayne was extremely proud to be associated with Suffolk University, and he promoted his place of business to anyone who would listen, whether a new student, a veteran faculty member, a Beacon Hill resident or someone he would casually meet while shopping in his hometown of Winchester.

“He could sell Suffolk all day to anyone,” said Thayer. “He spoke so eloquently about Gleason Archer, our roots and where we are today. He truly believed in Suffolk University and everything it stands for. That’s one of the things that made him so special.”

Rebecca Ann Rudolph
University Archives / Moakley Institute