Passion for Teaching, Research, Writing Defined the Life of Dr. Jon Moris | Eastern

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A ceremony to honor and remember the life of Utah State University Eastern professor Jon Moris was recently held in Bluff, Utah, where friends, colleagues and students from USU Eastern and the USU Logan participated.

Moris, a professor emeritus in anthropology since 2009, and adjunct professor, began his teaching career on the USU Logan Campus in 1980. He continued teaching, writing and doing research for USU on the Uintah and Blanding campuses, retiring from USU Eastern, Blanding at the age of 75, just one day before his death, May 30, from heart complications.

In addition to the recent memorial service in Bluff, the Moris family also plans to commemorate his life during a private celebration on July 25th at the Little Church of the Wildwood in Featherville. His daughter, Julia Moris-Heartley, said any friend or relative who would like to attend is welcome.

In lieu of flowers, the family would like to establish a fund to perpetuate their father’s goal of a lasting archive for his books. They also welcome any remembrances of their father. Those who wish to share or inquire may do so by emailing Moris-Heartley at: morishartley@gmail.com.

While at USU, Moris, who was born in Kiomboi, Tanganyika to missionary parents in 1939, taught 14 different courses in the areas of comparative rural development, African pastoralism, applied economic/cultural anthropology, international development, and peoples of Africa and of the World.

USU Eastern Vice Chancellor Guy Denton said Moris opened his eyes to the world, especially to Africa. He remembers first meeting him as a student in 1977.

“When I had the opportunity to work in Somalia for USU in 1982, it was Jon’s words and example that made it possible for me to take my young family to this far-away land,” Denton said. “Whenever I had a question about how to design a course or training program for Somali Cooperative Extension Agents, Jon always had ideas and a book or two.”

It was also Moris who mentored and guided Denton in his work to build a new department and create new curriculum at Makerere University.

“Over the last 15 years, I have also had the pleasure of working with Jon, first in the Uintah Basin and then in Blanding,” Denton said. “Jon’s legacy is the countless students he has influenced. To the last day of his life, his books and research of the peoples of the world, were his passion.”

USU Eastern Chancellor Joe Peterson said Moris gave freely of himself to the Blanding Campus students and staff.

“The last time I saw him, he was giving a lecture on archeological dating methods — things like carbon-fourteen decay and tree-ring analysis,” Peterson said. “He did these things, I believe, because he loved the life of the mind and he wanted to share his passions.”

One of his students, Georgiana Simpson, called him “simply the most generous professor whose class I’ve taken, and I have had some great instructors over the years.”

Simpson took a graduate-level course in Southwest Indian Culture from him about a year ago. “He ALWAYS gave thorough and thought-provoking answers to any of my questions. His critiques of my work were hard-hitting, but always fair, never cruel.”

In one of those critiques, Moris is kindly chastising her and her classmates for not digging deeper in their research and failing to tap some prime-source library reference...
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materials, including a 2011 book, “If the Land Owned Us” by Blanding’s own history professor, Bob McPherson.

“It is now a classic on the Ute Mountain Utes,” he lectured students, “and has a great deal you should have used in your papers. The biggest failure all across the class was a neglect of looking at the best sources first. Many of you went to web sources, some very unreliable, and they simply do not measure up to what you could have found in any library.”

His critique to the students was not short on words, either. He went on at length to make three more important points to them about what they could have done better. And then this: “Most professors would not be so generous, so don’t make that mistake in your other courses!”

McPherson, who still teaches at USU Eastern, said Moris will be sorely missed by staff and faculty.

“Jon was a true scholar who brought his years of field experience to classes in the Native American Studies certificate and to the Anthropology Department,” he said. “He was well known for his academic rigor, but also his compassion for students. Years of working in Africa and in underdeveloped countries fostered a strong sense of humanity for those he taught and served.”

That soft-hearted side behind the stern veneer is something Simpson cherishes.

“Jon became a mentor and friend, always willing to visit with me regarding future academic and professional plans,” she said. “He championed me on this campus and I am forever grateful.”

And then she let her champion and friend have the final word when she shared some good advice he gave her prior to an upcoming exam:

“With your background,” he wrote to her, “you should be in good shape for any factual test, and instead, your likely problem will be if you get too stressed, you will do poorly on essay questions, which require you to think creatively. So don’t stress out!”

Before coming to USU, Moris worked 17 years in East Africa, including a period as a Project Manager of a large range-development project among the Maasai. Beginning in 1980, his research focused on irrigation, extension and the fate of Africa’s pastoralists during recent droughts. He has co-authored six textbooks on African development and qualitative methods, and more recently wrote texts on Applied Anthropology and International Development.

He received a bachelor’s degree in zoology from Seattle Pacific College in 1960, a master’s degree in anthropology from Northwestern University in 1964 and a Ph.D. in anthropology from Northwestern University in 1970.

Moris was named Researcher of the Year in 1990 by the USU College of Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences, and in 1995, the college named him Teacher of the Year in the Social Sciences Division.

“He lived his life to the very end pursuing his lifelong passions of teaching and writing,” Moris-Heartley said.