T R I B U T E

ALAN DUNDE, REVERED PROFESSOR OF FOLKLORE AND ANTHROPOLOGY, PASSED AWAY AT THE AGE OF 70

BERKELEY – Alan Dundes, professor of anthropology and folklore who earned an international reputation for his Freudian deconstruction of everything from fairy tales to football to the Book of Genesis, died Wednesday (March 30). He was 70.

Dundes collapsed Wednesday afternoon at Giannini Hall on campus while teaching a graduate seminar on folklore theory and techniques. Students called 911, and he was rushed to Alta Bates-Summit Medical Center in Berkeley, where officials said he was pronounced dead upon arrival of an apparent heart attack.

“To call Alan Dundes a giant in his field is a great understatement,” said George Breslauer, a professor of political science and dean of the Division of Social Sciences in UC Berkeley’s College of Letters & Science. “He virtually constructed the field of modern folklore studies and trained many of its most distinguished scholars. Anyone who has ever taken a class with Alan Dundes knows that it was an unforgettable experience.”

Simon Bronner, Distinguished University Professor of American Studies and Folklore at Pennsylvania State University in Harrisburg and editor of the Encyclopedia of American Folklife, said Dundes “will undoubtedly go down in history as one of the most influential folklorists, indeed one of the most influential minds, the world has known. That mind had an incredible range, reaching into cultures around the globe, and all manner of material including literature, narratives, art, customs, speech and games. His specialty was not in a single genre, but in the provocative interpretation.”

In the classroom, Dundes earned a legion of fans among the thousands of students who took his courses, easily among the most sought after on campus. Dundes made such an impression that, in 2000, one of his undergraduate students from the 1960s sent him a check for $1 million. He used the anonymous gift to establish a UC Berkeley distinguished professorship in folkloristics.

Survivors include his wife, Carolyn of Berkeley; son, David of Walnut Creek; daughters, Lauren Dundes Streiff of Owings Mills, Md., and Alison Dundes Renteln of Altadena, Calif.; and six grandchildren. Dundes’ son is an information technology manager. Dundes Streiff is a professor of sociology, and Dundes Renteln is a professor of political science and anthropology.

— By Kathleen Maclay

The board and staff of NATIONAL FOLKLORE SUPPORT CENTRE share our grief with the readers of Indian Folklife and send our condolences to Mrs. Carolyn Dundes.

Alan Dundes, our mentor

It is with profound grief that we begin to come to terms with the loss and legacy of Professor Alan Dundes. Truly a giant on the Berkeley campus, he not only epitomized the highest standards of academic scholarship, he also personalized and humanized it. An extraordinary teacher, an inspired mentor, and an impeccable scholar, he changed the contours of the discipline of folklore with the same ease and aplomb with which he changed the academic and personal trajectories of many a student. His booming laughter, his child-like glee and enthusiasm were the first signals of his presence when you took your spot in a long line of students that snaked its way down the corridor of the Anthropology department. When you finally reached his door, and he registered your presence, he would reach deep into papers placed in piles on tables that were famed for their messiness, and give you the reference to the article in an obscure journal that he had been saving for you all semester. He cherished the times he spent at the Folklore workshops in India, stubbornly and happily wore the seemingly same deep red floral designed cotton Kalamkari shirts that were tailored for him almost annually there. Dr. Dundes was truly international in stature, in outlook, in his scholarship. Yet he also deeply loved Berkeley, its campus, its football team, its folklore, its student body, and most importantly, its hard won academic and social freedoms. If his absence on the campus is stunning in its impact, no words can even begin to understand the loss and loneliness that confronts his wife of 48 years, Mrs. Carolyn Dundes, and his family. Carolyn Dundes is the person who cherished and challenged, invigorated and protected, checked and multiplied the greatness that he was. May the outpouring of prayers and goodwill from friends and well-wishers from all over the world strengthen her and her family in their personal tragedy.

Kirtana Thangavelu
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