



Patrick F. Leahy

James Merryman Memorial Service | May 2, 2015

Good afternoon. On behalf of the entire Wilkes University community, I want to welcome all of you to our campus, especially the members of Jim's family who join us from Nebraska. Thank you all for being here today for what I hope will be a celebration of an incredible life. I am honored to say a few words about our friend and colleague Jim, on behalf of the entire Wilkes community. As you know, Jim spent 25 years of his life here at Wilkes, but 2015 marks a 50-year relationship between Nancy and Wilkes. Nancy started her higher education here in 1965. Most of you know Jim and Nancy a lot longer than I and are therefore eminently more qualified to talk about them. I'll do my best to reflect the shared sentiments of the entire Wilkes family.

To Nancy and to Juliann, we offer our deepest sympathy and support during this difficult time. It was abundantly clear that the two of you meant everything to him. A man capable of a world of love, Jim loved you two more than anything. To all of his colleagues here at Wilkes, especially those in the social sciences — Tom, Bob, Rob, Kyle, and others — we offer you our support. How do you replace a huge figure — literally and figuratively — like Jim? To all of his students, current and former, we offer you our condolences. How lucky you have been to have Jim as a teacher. To all of his neighbors in his beloved Bear Creek Village, we offer you our condolences too. Who will swim the lake as early as May and as late as October? One day a couple years ago, my son Brian said: "Dad, what's that moving across the lake? Could it be the Loch Ness Monster?" My other son, Jack, said, "No, it's only Mr. Merryman." And, finally, to his great friend Rick Williams, we also offer you our sincere condolences. Outside of his family, no one was more faithful to Jim during his declining health than Rick. He loved you, Rick. I know. He told me.

There is such a big, gaping hole in the middle of our campus today. Anytime someone who has spent 25 years in service to Wilkes leaves us, it is a big loss. When you add to this the fact that Jim was a larger-than-life character, it makes the void even larger. As I said, there is a big, gaping hole in our Wilkes community today.

I think the very best way to fill in this hole in our community — in our collective hearts — is by pouring memories into it. Memory after memory. And with Jim Merryman there are so many memories.

He had a zest for life unrivaled in our community. Colleagues remember one Wilkes party where Jim played the Phantom of the Opera, running around the rafters in a mask and cape. They remember his 60th birthday party, when he introduced his new Jim Merryman Quartet to the crowd. And, wow, could he and Nancy dance. They always seemed to get invited to the dance functions. He never stopped reinventing himself: completing the Creative Writing Program late in his career, becoming an early

pioneer of online learning, learning new musical instruments later in life, hiking in Tibet in his 60s. As Tom Baldino said, “Jim never burned out. Even had he lived to 100, he wouldn’t have burned out on life.” And who will forget his outfits, his ties and his dress handkerchiefs in particular? Nancy was kind enough to loan me one of Jim’s many ties for today’s celebration.

He had a unique sense of humor, much of which I am not at liberty to share with this audience today. I’m thinking of a unique gift from Africa that he gave to his friend Rob Seeley and politically incorrect comments that he made to his beloved student Jacob Parrick at the hospital. Maybe we can share some of these stories at the reception. He was always upbeat. Even staring down the gauntlet of ALS, he was upbeat. He never, ever complained. Going to see him was like going on a retreat. You left grateful and energized and renewed. When I last saw him, I asked him how he was doing. He wrote on his electronic pad in barely legible print, “Last couple weeks tough.” That’s when I knew the end was near. He could be an agitator. He would ask his colleagues, who were huge Penn State fans, on Mondays following Penn State losses, “Did Penn State play this weekend? I didn’t happen to notice the score, did you?” He once told me to my face, “You know, Pat, you weren’t my pick for president,” building the confidence of a new president. He reminded me of this a couple years later. “You know, Pat, you weren’t my pick for president.” Then, he went on to say, “Boy, was I wrong.” It was the nicest thing he ever said to me.

But more than anything, he was a teacher. It’s what he enjoyed the most. He would take students to the ends of the Earth to teach them about diversity and cross-cultural understanding. As I mentioned, he was an early adopter of online learning, reveling in the freedom it gave him to teach from anywhere — from the shores of Bear Creek Lake to the deserts of Africa. Henry Adams once wrote that “a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.” Evidence of this came in a letter to me last week from one of his former students, Ed Ciaromboli. Ed wrote: “I had Dr. Merryman for just one class, but he made a profound and lasting impact on my life. He encouraged me to think about my place in the world, to travel, and to do what I could to improve my own village. While his passing brings profound sadness, it also reminds me that I would not be where I am today without him. I consider myself very fortunate to have had him in my life.” Imagine how many other students feel this very same way. Jim taught to the very end. In his final days, one of the things that most agitated him was falling behind in grading assignments for his students. When he passed away, Nancy wanted to finish the class out of respect for the students, one dedicated teacher replacing another. All of these memories, and so many more that each of you could offer, help to fill this void that is left in his absence. They all help to fill in the hole that is in our campus today. But, in addition to memories, there’s another element that can help to fill in this void: pledges. Pledges to take elements of Jim’s life and make them our own.

I read last week that another priceless person, someone with the same zest for life like Jim, was lost on Mount Everest during the horrible Nepal earthquake. His name was Dan Fredinburg, an executive with Google. He was such an inspiration to his friends that they started a movement called LiveDan. Well, I suggest that we start our own movement, and we call it LiveJim. What does LiveJim mean? And how does one LiveJim? LiveJim means to sing and dance, to swim no matter how cold the water, to drink strong martinis, to debate the big issues of the day and to travel. Perhaps above all else it means to travel. LiveJim means to live in a small community and yet always have a global perspective. LiveJim means to respect other people no matter their color, their religion, their economic status, their gender, their sexual orientation, their whatever. LiveJim means being so interested in other people that time stands still when in their company. LiveJim means being so grateful for what we have that it motivates us to be better people. LiveJim means being so excited by the precious gift of life that we never burn

out. LiveJim means, as the hymn goes, letting there be peace on Earth and letting it begin with me.

Won't all of you help to fill up the hole in our community by pledging to LiveJim? If you do, we can fill up this hole, and build first a mound, then a hill and ultimately over time a mountain in Jim's honor. So today I ask God to pray for our absent friend Jim and for all of us gathered here in his memory. And, as the African Pygmy Women's Prayer says:

“Morning has risen;

God, take away from us every pain, Every ill, every mishap;

God, let us come safely home.”