

David B. Johnson, May 8, 2019

Description

We are sad to report that David B. Johnson, retired mathematics faculty passed away on May 8, 2019.

David started working as a full-time mathematics professor at DVC in 1981, but had worked eight years prior as an adjunct faculty member. David held a B.A. in mathematics, and a B.A. in psychology from UC Santa Cruz, and a M.A. in mathematics from UC Berkeley.

In David's retirement bio, he stated that one of the highlights of his DVC career was team teaching two integrated calculus and physics courses with Rachel Westlake, Oshri Karmon and Jim Ardini. One course combined Math 192 and Physics 129, and the other combined Math 292 and Physics 130. These courses were funded by the US Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the General Electric Foundation. David said that FIPSE reported the project generated the best statistics of any other project! Another highlight for David was co-writing the liberal arts math textbook *Mathematics a Practical Odyssey* with Tom Mowry.

David retired in 2015.

Jun 18, 2019

My father was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia in March of 2018. He was given a 16% survival rate; he knew the odds were stacked against him and insisted on fighting Leukemia head on because he had a lot of life to live. He was the strongest person I know. Hurdle after hurdle came his way towards the end of his life and he dealt with each of them in stride, never giving up hope. He fought through mysterious rashes, nightly fevers, a stroke, having to be in isolation and even a broken femur. After a 14 month battle, he passed away in his sleep on May 8, 2019.

My father was so lucky that he was able to fight as long as he did. When he was initially diagnosed, his doctor said that if he didn't seek treatment he wouldn't be alive in 3 months. His heavy duty treatment began in July 2018 as he spent a total of 227 out of 293 days between UCSF and nursing homes. His treatment consisted of some heavy duty chemo's, one of which was very scary, and a bone marrow transplant. Luckily, my uncle was a 100% match. My dad moved into UCSF in July of 2018 to undergo several rounds of chemo before getting his transplant on October 10, 2018 (which the nurses called his second birthday). My brother and I will be forever grateful for the extra year of life he gifted my dad and us.

Besides breaking his femur, post-transplant life was looking pretty good and things were beginning to look up. It wasn't until February 2019 when my dad began showing signs of rejection and was re-admitted at UCSF. After a month or so, the rejection symptoms appeared to be under control and he was transferred to a nursing home to help him stand/walk due to severe muscle atrophy. He was sent back to UCSF about a month later as he continued to battle rejection and only got weaker from there. My dad made the decision to go into hospice on May 6th, care was withdrawn on May 7th and he passed away nearly 30 hours later during the early hours on May 8th.

I vividly remember my last day with him. It was May 7th. I got to the hospital around 4PM and although he was only conscious for about 15 minutes, I stayed until about 11:30PM. My dad found a new liking for baseball and became an Oakland A's fan (woohoo!) during the last month of his life. On the night of May 7th, even though he wasn't awake, my dad and I watched Mike Fiers pitch his second career no-hitter. I'd like to believe that was for my dad. I then kissed my dad goodnight on his forehead, told him I loved him and that I'd be back tomorrow after work.

From Dave's daughter Lauren

The following was contributed by Ian Bowman in June 2022

Dear Karen, Lauren, and United Faculty of Contra Costa Community College District,

I was very sad to [read that Professor David B. Johnson passed away](#).

In the span of 18 weeks, when I took his Precalculus class at Diablo Valley College, Mr. Johnson had a beneficial impact on my life and I think of him often.

I took Mr. Johnson's class in the Fall of 1997. Within 30 minutes of the first lecture, we all realized the course would be difficult. And we realized this was just the way it was going to be. He told us, "There could be another teacher out there who will pass you with a lot less effort, but that won't help you in the long run." He also told us, "This stuff that I'm telling you will start to disappear as soon as you walk outside and go down those steps. So, do your homework as soon as you can."

But we stuck around. We didn't know if Mr. Johnson was right. But we appreciated that he was real. During the class, Mr. Johnson said and did a number of things that I still think about, and I want to share those here.

Thoughtful

Although Mr. Johnson was not an easy teacher, he had a gentle and determined teaching style. After the first lecture, I asked him a question. He answered it, then asked me my name. "Ian Bowman. Okay." Within one or two weeks, he learned all of our names.

Mr. Johnson was not strict. He cared primarily if we learned the material or not. Once, a student's cell phone rang right after Mr. Johnson posed a question to the class. Instead of being angry, Mr. Johnson said simply, "Phil has people calling in to help him answer the question."

Anyone ever see a 3 walking around?

During one part of a lecture, Mr. Johnson discussed imaginary numbers, and i . "Now, why is i referred to as an 'imaginary number'? Mathematicians and philosophers have been hung up on identifying what numbers actually exist or not. So for example, at first we had so-called, 'natural numbers' which do not include 0. Whole numbers do include 0. Apparently, there was something unnatural about 0. There are 'rational numbers,' but some fractions are labeled 'irrational.' What does it mean if you call someone 'irrational'? It's not a nice thing to say. And, again, we have 'imaginary numbers.'"

Then Mr. Johnson struck a bell in my mind that is still ringing: "All of this is something we can use to make sense of the world. But none of it is real, or natural. Like the number 3. Anyone ever see a 3 walking around?"

401k

In one lecture, Mr. Johnson discussed compound interest. He showed us various graphs.

"Imagine this is in your bank account. What you can do is, invest money tax-free when you start working. And then you see how interest compounds and when you retire, you will be able to take money from this end of the curve here, on the right." Then Mr. Johnson moved his hand to the left. "Now look at what happens if you wait 10 years to invest. You'd be over here at this part of the curve. Which part of the curve would you like to be at when you retire?"

We definitely knew which part of the curve we wanted.

“This is called a 401k,” Mr. Johnson continued. “When you start working, don’t just think, ‘Hey I’m young and I’m going to blow all my money for a while.’ Invest right away. That way when you retire you can withdraw money every month from your account, and every month you will re-earn that amount in interest.”

That advice was not in our PreCalculus textbook. But for those of us who had never heard of a 401k “which in 1997 was potentially the entire class” we earned millions listening to Mr. Johnson that day.

Ian needs to shave his head

Mr. Johnson’s midterms were not easy. Before turning one in, I said, “If I get an A on this test, I’ll shave my head.” I’m not sure what I was thinking, exactly.

Then I got an A on the test. Mr. Johnson ended up relaying what I had said to the class, followed by, “I think we need to hold him to that, right?” So, later in the week, I visited a friend of mine in Benicia, who applied his clippers to my scalp and, voilÃ .

A few days later, Mr. Johnson pointed to my head and told everyone to give me an applause. The whole thing was very silly. Probably also annoying. Sorry.

But I had been so tired of doing poorly in school. I was also sick of the reputation I had as a person, as a poor student, and someone who couldn’t get things done. I had been an awful student in high school, receiving Ds and Fs in many subjects, including math. After graduating from Benicia High in 1996, I spent one year at Diablo Valley College enrolling haphazardly, learning Film, Tae Kwan Do and Photography, among other topics. Somehow, in the middle of that, I realized I was actually interested in computers. So, I decided to major in Computer Science.

I hoped that somewhere inside me was a person who could do well in college, and graduate. Mr. Johnson’s class, perhaps specifically the unveiling of the head shave, is where that feeling beyond hope and gained momentum.

Clues

I did well in Calculus I and II, but then exactly a year after taking Mr. Johnson's class, when I took Calculus III, I failed the first midterm. I felt myself slipping. I was in Mr. Hutchinson's class, another well-known difficult (but also good, as I would find out later!) math teacher. I was worried that perhaps I just couldn't do it.

So, I walked into Mr. Johnson's office. I told him what had happened.

"Okay but now Hutch likes you to do things his way. Are you following along?"

"I'm trying to," I offered.

Mr. Johnson asked to see my midterm. "You need to figure out what to fix, and this," he said, pointing at the midterm, "will offer many clues." As he reviewed it with me, he discussed various principles.

"Yeah, I know," I kept saying

"Well, you're not doing it. You need to write it down."

Essentially, what he was telling me, and what I realized was, well, I was freaking out. And there was no easy answer.

"I'm thinking of dropping," I said.

At that point, Mr. Johnson knew of my plans to go to UC Davis. Mr. Johnson said, "Ian, if you get to Davis and drop, your back is going to be covered by the footprints of those rushing to take your place."

I was in his office when he could have been doing something else, like helping his actual (and probably less emo) students, or doing some grading. But Mr. Johnson took some time out of his day to tell me not to give up.

And I didnâ??t give up, Mr. Johnson. Iâ??m still here. Thank you.

Lauren, I am very happy to have met your dad, and to have taken his class. I was also touched to read of your final memories with him. Thank you for sharing those. And one more important thing: Go Aâ??s.

Ian

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