

English Department, Tufts University

Memories of Deborah Digges

To share your memory of Deborah Digges, please send an email to chantal.hardy@tufts.edu:

- Include in the subject line: "Tribute to Deborah Digges"
- Your comment
- Your full name
- For current or former Tufts students, please indicate year of graduation
- For faculty or staff, please indicate department/position



Deborah Digges was a great teacher and friend to the many students she has had over the years. To say an inspiration underwhelms the identity she helped provide young writers. We will never be able to replace her, and will always miss her. I humbly offer the following in her memory.

The Elusive Names of Carpet

The elusive names of carpet
miles below the picture on my desk, smiling

I think about what I think I know,
the cabinet with the folders,
the green one with pens and a box of staples
in the kitchen near the sink,

less certain as I am
that something is building
greater than anyone watching me would expect.

That I will be a poet.

That I was going to talk to you again
about Ted Hughes and ovens
and the irony it still strikes me
given the circumstance of us
in the raw, uncured now.

Hiding in your voice,
something men want
that they never understand,
women in pain and long brown hair,
whispers,
dry straw on a swale of muscle.

-Christopher Rimkus, Class of 1994

I am grateful to have studied with Professor Digges; she made poetry accessible to me for the first time. When I think of Professor Digges I cannot help but hear her voice reciting these words of Dickinson's:

"There's a certain Slant of light, Winter afternoons – That oppresses, like the Heft Of Cathedral Tunes –" in her very particular, unmistakable cadence. She instinctively and almost involuntarily read with passion and empathy. The wonder with which she viewed poetry continues to be an inspiration.

-Diana Landes, Class of 2008

"I am a former student of Deborah's and was greatly shocked and saddened to learn of her death. She was a wonderful and giving teacher and inspired so many, including me, to become poets and writers. I have written a poem in her memory that embodies some of her teachings as I remember them."

Massage Sonnet

-- At Mandara Spa, Aruba Marriott, remembering Deborah Digges

Offer yourself in the way of a child,
splayed and unconcerned about the curl
of a limb, the arrangement of towel
revealing the shell of shy genital.
The hands that wave and recede deal with parts,
oiling rusty mechanisms. Submit.
Allow your mouth to drool. Show all your warts.
This is the hour your best poems will visit,
and your worst. Later, you can only rescue
so many words but some will be enough
to compensate for this half-conscious theft.
Do only what you have been told to do:
Relax your arm, roll on your back, breathe. Breathe.
So much, or so little, time might be left.

-Jen Karetnick, Class of 1990

"In addition to being a wonderful poet, Deborah was an outstanding teacher and an inspiring mentor. Most importantly, she was kind to all the confused kids (as I think of us) in her class. During my years at Tufts, and in the years after when I sought her advice, she was unfailingly helpful, enthusiastic, and supportive.

What more could any student ask of a teacher? I didn't fully realize until she was gone what an impact she had made on me and how valuable it was having that kind of support.

I'm grateful that I had the chance to know her and to learn from her."

-Olya Kenney, Class of 1989

"I can't tell you how upset I am about Deborah Digges' passing. In 1999, in the first semester of my sophomore year of college, I took Deborah's "Forms of Poetry" class. Up until that point, I had been a secret poet, collecting them in my journals and my head, but never having taken a class. And I was a drama major, so I was also an envious writer of those who were courageous enough to be English majors. Then I took Deborah's class and everything changed. She encouraged my writing and gave me confidence to share it. She nurtured me by introducing me to what would become my favorite poet, Sharon Olds. She lent me her own copy (with a special inscription from the poet) of Sharon Olds' book of poetry because she thought I would like it. She was right; I did, and I have to admit, I never gave it back to her. First, I just forgot and then it became something special to me, this book that Deborah gave to me, that Sharon gave to Deborah. She might have always wondered about where that book went and I feel a little guilty that I kept it all these years, but now I feel lucky that I have something that was distinctly Deborah's.

She was such a wonderful, warm-hearted and encouraging teacher. And sure enough, when I came back from my spring semester abroad, I decided to double major in English, meaning I had to take 6 English classes in my senior year. I asked Deborah to be my adviser and she accepted. I only have her to thank for helping give me the confidence to pursue this second passion that until then had only been just that, a passion.

I feel so sad that she is not in this world anymore, and so lucky to have had a small amount of time with her in my life. And I will always treasure my "borrowed" book that was hers."

-Rachel Evans, Class of 2002

"Deborah taught me to express intense emotions through my native language. She transferred on to me her appreciation for the beauty of life and words. I credit her for helping me grow as an English major and person. While we are mourning the loss of our friend, others are rejoicing to meet her behind the veil."

-Michael Ghory, Class of 2007

"Deborah... Was a rich presence. Was an honest critic. Was an encouraging teacher. Was kind. Wrote in a way that made you want to try. Spoke in a way that made you realize things. Gave you her attention. Gave you nudges you could barely feel until one day you were different. Had a childlike energy that distracted from her looming intellect. Had an earthy wisdom that belied her childlike energy. Is and will be among the first faces I see when I think of the word 'poet.'"

-Lisbeth Kaiser, Class of 2002

"I enjoyed two years with Deborah in the 90's. She was a terrific, inspiring, elegant, beautiful teacher."

-Marni Kamins, Class of 1998

"Deborah was a unique woman -- passionate, kind, eccentric. Her love of poetry was evident; her talent was astounding. She was deeply committed to her students, and because of her, I was able to discover new dimensions in poetry. Deborah's work was devastatingly honest and painfully beautiful. I am shocked and saddened by this loss, and my thoughts are with her family and close friends. Deborah, I hope you have found peace."

-Rebecca Katz, Class of 2007

"I just read about the death of Prof. Digges at "The New York Times" obituary page. I am an English teacher from the midwest, Indiana, and grew up in a large family much like her (seven children). I hadn't heard of Deborah until reading about her tragic death and was saddened by the news. Her death reminded once again of John Donne's famous poem, 'ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.' I am a contemporary of Deborah's, nearly fifty-eight years old now and began my teaching career in 1976 at Indiana State University in the English Department. I read a brief biographical sketch of her life. She married an air force pilot. My father was also an officer in the USAF.

When I left for college at age seventeen, I knew I would never serve in the military, having spent most of my childhood years on military bases around the USA and Europe. I discovered my love for literature while living in England for four years and attending high school there. It was glorious to live in London in the 1960's. Visiting the old haunts of Charles Dickens at that time in my life left an indelible impression on me. Much like Deborah, I was always troubled by the fact that I was unable to enjoy the company of my parents with all the other kids demanding their attention the whole day long. My father one day left for Vietnam and never came home. Her husband went off to fly combat missions in Vietnam. I feel the deepest sorrow for Deborah and I never even met the woman. I wish I had. I will read her poems tonight simply as a tribute to her years as a teacher, author, and gifted poet. Tufts University has lost a distinguished teacher and I'm sure will be sadly missed by many students and colleagues. I wish to extend my sincere condolences.

I would like to imagine that Deborah is at this very moment in Heaven enjoying a chat with Emily Dickinson. Deborah would be most worthy of Emily's society."

-Robert McKinney

“Deborah was a gifted teacher and devoted mentor. Her encouragement, understanding, and insight always brought a smile to the faces of her students. We'll miss you, Professor.”

-Tim Noetzel, Class of 2008

“I took Professor Digges' creative writing--non-fiction class in Spring 1990 as a sophomore. It turned out to be the most enjoyable English class I had ever taken. Her teaching style was very liberal and flexible to each student's own style, and we were truly allowed to express our ideas in all the autobiographical essays. Given that she was such an accomplished writer, you would think she was a tough grader and held everyone to the highest standard, but that was not the case at all. She listened to the need of each student and took every opportunity to appreciate even the slightest writing improvement. I was sincerely touched. I had never had a teacher who was so positive and encouraging towards everything I handed in. To this day I still feel bad about the one single class that I skipped from her for no legitimate reason or excuse.

Another example: there was one student in our class who definitely showed no interests in writing or even attending the class. Most professors would have just ignored that student and issued a D when it was over. Not Professor Digges. She continued to show patience and spend individual time with the student, in order to stimulate learning and enhance a sense of belonging. And, you know it, the student started to turn things around and got much progress towards the end. That is what makes Professor Digges such a distinct teacher and mentor, on top of her extraordinary writing talents.

We won't forget you ever, Professor. Rest in peace.”

-Larry Tsoi, Class of 1992

“Deborah Digges was one of the few teachers I had during my time at Tufts who taught me both how to see and how to feel, and it was from her alone that I learned that those processes were acts of creation. She communicated this fact partly through example. Those of us who were lucky enough to study and write under her attentive guidance knew that she was a person who was constantly engaged with the world around her; and her well-earned and long cultivated gift for transforming that world into a spiritual experience made us feel that every moment in her presence was a communion.

Deb's power was like gravity: she drew the world in around her. She was the center of a universe that she created and re-created at every moment, and she invited us to be a part of it. That was the good fortune of her students, and we each yearned, instinctively and passionately, to incarnate that life within us, with perhaps ten percent of the same grace she exuded.

But it was her generosity that I believe really set her apart. She never treated us indifferently or carelessly, and if she was ever reticent, it was because she knew that the discovery was ours alone to bring to light. As was more often the case, Deb gave of herself bravely and eagerly in service of her student's work. She participated in our acts of creation and, like a midwife, coaxed out of our rough and clumsy attempts at poetry the heart of the subject, our true subject. To create with her is one of the greatest joys I have known.

If Deb really was a midwife, she was also something of a mother figure. I say this delicately, but truthfully: this is how I felt during the year she acted as my thesis advisor, and is how I will always think of her. She provided me with the framework and the life-giving spark that made my creation possible, and she infused within me an ever-renewing life and an ever-renewing love for writing, and for the world that was peculiarly my own - for what comforts me and pains me, what haunts me and gives me hope.

Now that she is gone, I can't help but feel like something of an orphan. I still feel the impulse to rush back to her and show her every new discovery I make, every cracked sea shell I wrestle from the ocean floor. And I am humbled to know that there are many, many other people out there who feel the same way. We, her acolytes, continue to do her work, continue to be constantly amazed by our broken and luminous world and continue to trace and document the paths of our solitary unmooring. Because this is all she wanted from her poets, her

orphans, her citizens of no country.”

-Seth Pitman, Class of 2005

“Deborah taught me everything I know about words. She was my mentor, editor, and friend through most of my years at Tufts as a creative writing student. She was able to provide constructive comments about poems and stories so skillfully that one’s enthusiasm to write never waned, despite having just sat through the equivalent of a big red “X” through the page. Her poems echoed a wonder about the natural world seen through the eyes of a doctor’s daughter, and contributed to my love of medicine and eventual pursuit of a career as a physician. When I read stories aloud to my children, a poem to a friend, I hear her voice in my head, and read with the cadence of a poet. Each phrase is laden with image and meaning. What a devastating loss to the Tufts community and the world at large.”

-Laura (Grontkowski) James, Class of 1990

I have two vivid memories of Professor Digges. The first, sitting in her office as the sun shone through the window lighting up her auburn hair. Her phone rang and she answered. "Hello my daaarlign...," she said. It was clear that she was in love, and this just made her glow even more brightly in my eyes. The second was visiting her home in Worcester. My classmates and I arrived to find her smiling, the picture of domestic bliss. The house smelled delicious--she had roasted a turkey and root vegetables and baked a cake for us. Well fed, she took us to read poetry in the autumn foliage by Elizabeth Bishop’s grave. She was so delightful and kind.

-Bailey Stoler, Class of 2002

