Dirk t. D. Held Memorial
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A Remembrance of Dirk t. D. Held

By Eric Adler, Assistant Professor of Classics

A few weeks ago, my dear colleague Richard Moorton referred to me as a Dirk Held protégé. Nothing could make me prouder.

And for good reason. I met Dirk on the very first day of my undergraduate career. It was August 1991, and I had climbed the four floors in Fanning Hall to his office. Once I arrived, Dirk informed me and five other nervous first-year students that we should take advanced Latin. To put it mildly, this did not go over well. We had yet to step foot in a classroom, and we were now expected to register for Latin 301. I recall a distinct sense of alarm among the students in his office.

Yet Dirk easily won us over. Don’t worry, he said: There won’t be any upper-classmen in the course, so you’ll all get through this together. He flashed a wry smile, and offered a few words of encouragement. Almost miraculously, he charmed a group of panic-stricken freshmen into signing up for an advanced course on Sallust and Tacitus.

As I think back on this encounter, I recognize how perfect it is. Here was Dirk at his charismatic best, calming students down and offering sage advice as he
welcomed them to the College. At the time, I didn’t realize that Dirk would ably be calming me down and offering me sage advice for over two decades.

Once I saw Dirk in action in the classroom, he quickly became one of my heroes. When he first walked into a class, he seemed like a classics professor straight from central casting. I’m sure more than a few thought that he’d be a dry pedant. But as he began to teach, his students immediately warmed to him. In addition to his prodigious learning, Dirk possessed a devilish sense of humor and an uncanny ability to connect with people.

It was because of Dirk that I decided to become a classics professor in the first place. I can pinpoint the time he did this quite clearly. It was my senior year in college, and my Greek course had a scheduling conflict with a theater class I required for my double major. When it proved impossible to complete an independent study in the theater department to remedy this situation, it seemed as if I would not graduate with a theater major. But Dirk stepped in. He told me that he would happily do an independent study with me on Roman theater. This was deemed acceptable to the theater department, and so we were off and running.

I had an impromptu meeting with Dirk in his office about the independent study. When I asked him what sorts of works I ought to read on the topic of Roman comedy, Dirk immediately rattled off the names of five or six books that I needed to consult.

This stunned me. Here was an expert in Greek philosophy—and, especially, the German reception of Greek philosophy—easily naming the most crucial modern
scholarly works on Roman theater. I thought to myself at the time: “If this is what a classics professor is, I want to be a classics professor.”

At the time, I didn’t recognize that Dirk was no ordinary classicist. Dirk possessed broad intellectual interests. He was always concerned with big questions, and this makes his scholarly articles and reviews a pleasure to read. When discussing matters with him, I was always amazed that there seemed to be nothing he hadn’t read, nothing he hadn’t read about.

And yet Dirk wore his learning lightly. He was always a true gentleman, and never engaged in ostentatious displays of his (considerable) acumen. This endeared Dirk to everyone at the College. To a young fellow faculty member amazed at Dirk’s reputation, I once said: “At Connecticut College, no one agrees about anything, but we all agree that we treasure and respect Dirk Held.” He readily agreed.

It was only once I became a faculty member at the College that I fully recognized Dirk’s herculean efforts on behalf of the students and the classical tradition. Dirk routinely taught overloads and numerous independent studies. A 4/3 course load was typical for him. He was also the anchor of the classics department, serving as its chair from 1980. He served on every imaginable committee at the College, and still found the time to publish widely and well.

Simply put, Dirk was the embodiment of selflessness. He was always giving—willing to do extra work to make things easier for others.

I have so many fond memories of Dirk that I could never recount them all. I’ll always treasure the time we spent together, whether we were sitting in his office translating lines of Vergil’s Aeneid in a course that became a de facto independent
study; or when a chance meeting at Brooks Brothers in Boston became an unscheduled coffee date; or our innumerable happy lunches in Cro.

Dirk was like a second father to me, and was my mentor. When I pondered attending graduate school, I called Dirk; when I weighed the prospects of a career in journalism, I called Dirk; and when I needed tips on landing an academic job, I called Dirk. I owe him so much that I could never pay everything back.

Thankfully, there are many like me. Through his exemplary career as a teacher and scholar, Dirk enriched the lives of thousands upon thousands of students. In this way, his life is a perpetual gift. Dirk bestowed on me this gift—a zeal for the classics and a reverence for life-long learning—early in my career. He inspires in all of us a hunger for knowledge and a passion for teaching.

In his *De officiis*, Cicero reminds us that: “we are not born for ourselves alone” (1.22). More than anyone else’s, Dirk’s life is a testament to this sentiment. And though I shall always miss him, his example will be with me forever.