Robert Birkby, a Vanderbilt student favorite, has died

Longtime Vanderbilt political science professor Robert H. Birkby, renowned for his high standards and his devotion to his students, died March 14 at Saint Thomas Hospital. Birkby, 85, had been suffering from cancer.

“He has a large following of former students who love and admire him,” said Fräncliffe Bergquist, former associate dean of academic affairs at Vanderbilt. “He was rough. He didn’t suffer fools lightly. But he was nurturing to those students who cared to improve.”

Birkby’s specialties included constitutional law, public law, judicial behavior and American political thought. He was chair of political science at Vanderbilt from 1974 to 1977, then acting chair from 1985 to 1987. He also served as director of undergraduate studies in political science for three decades.

“Whenever I go out to give a talk, inevitably people in the audience ask me about Bob Birkby and say he was the most important professor they had,” said Bruce Oppenheimer, professor of political science at Vanderbilt and a longtime colleague of Birkby. “He was held in very high regard by students for such a tough grader.”

Birkby won Vanderbilt’s top awards for his work with students both inside and outside the classroom. In 1974, he was awarded the Chancellor’s Cup for “the greatest contribution outside the classroom to student-faculty relationships.” Then, in 1982, he won the Madison Sarratt Prize for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching.

“Bob was an institution and helped establish the foundation for undergraduate teaching that defines political science to this day,” said John Geer, Vanderbilt’s vice provost for academic and strategic affairs and the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of Political Science. “His
death is a serious loss on many fronts, but his legacy endures.”

Birkby somehow remembered the names of all his students past and present, Bergquist said. “He made it a point to know his students. So often they can be a sea of faces, but even in introductory courses he really got to know his students.”

With a reputation as a tough grader, Birkby did not hold back when commenting on the work of his students.

“I still remember his scathing comments: ‘Your ignorance of the facts fatally flaws your argument’ – followed by a D,” wrote Matt Park (BA’98) of Cumming, Georgia, in a letter published in the Winter 2016 issue of Vanderbilt magazine. “It was at once both the most disheartening and motivating thing I’ve ever had said to me.”

Born in Lamar, Colorado, Birkby began his career as general manager of his Lamar-based family business, the Birkby Lumber Co., then moved on to be claims and file clerk for AT & SF Railway in Denver.

He graduated with a business degree from the University of Colorado in 1952. After a two-year stint in the Army, he went back to Colorado and earned a master’s degree in 1960.

Moving to Princeton University, Birkby switched to political science and earned a second master’s in 1962 and a Ph.D. in 1963.

After one year of teaching at Princeton, Birkby spent the rest of his career at Vanderbilt, where he was awarded emeritus status in 2000.

“He was called on quite often to serve on committees,” Bergquist said. “He had very strong administrative skills.”


The author of The Court and Public Policy, published in 1983 by Congressional Quarterly Press, Birkby was a member of the American Political Science Association, Southern Political Science Association, Law and Society Association and the American Judicature Society.

Birkby was a creature of habit, Oppenheimer said.

“He would always have clam chowder for lunch on Friday at Sarratt, always went grocery shopping on Wednesday and was part of a coffee group in Sarratt early every morning, which assured him his favorite parking spot. And he always gave a midterm exam on the Friday before the start of spring break ,” Oppenheimer said.

Survivors include his brother, Alan Birkby, and sister-in-law, Jackie Birkby, of Pearland, Texas; and nephew Kevin Birkby and his wife Amber Birkby, of Houston.
A gathering to honor the memory and exchange stories about Birkby was scheduled for 4 p.m. Friday, April 15., in Room 235 of The Commons Center (the Multipurpose Room). Parking was available in Lott 77, at the corner of 18th Avenue South and Horton.