

Dr. Carl G. Vaught

September 20, 2005

Distinguished Professor of Philosophy – Baylor University

Dr. Carl Vaught, distinguished professor of philosophy, died Sunday afternoon at age 65 after a long battle with Parkinson's disease.

Faculty who knew him said he lived as an astute philosopher whose passion was contagious, while students and other professors said he made sure his scholarly pursuits connected with the reality of human existence.

"He was a philosophical touchstone for all of us," said Amy Antoninka, a fourth-year graduate student from Pittsburgh.

She recalled the way Vaught had taught the *Phaedo*, a philosophical work by Plato that describes the last days of Socrates' life.

Antoninka said Vaught stressed to students that the way Socrates' friends would carry on without him was as important as other philosophical matters. Vaught had been doing just that all along, she said, by directing students to philosophical questions that are relevant to their lives.

"He thought of philosophy as a way of living," Antoninka said.

Anne Bowery, associate professor of philosophy and director of graduate studies, said Vaught was "completely dedicated to the life of the mind" and saw philosophy as "genuine engagement with life."

Vaught often explained this engagement by telling personal stories, she said.

She described them as "poignant stories that didn't allow us to escape into an intangible world of ideas," although Vaught "wasn't afraid of wonder and mystery."

In his book *Metaphor, Analogy and the Place of Places*, Vaught writes, "Stories ... generate wonder and the desire for wisdom; they mobilize faith and the search for understanding; they plunge us into doubt and produce the quest for certainty."

Antoninka said the book is filled with many personal anecdotes -- some funny, some painful, all of them essential to Vaught's philosophical livelihood.

Dr. Robert Beatty, chairman of the philosophy department, told a story about Vaught's passion for philosophy. He said David Solomon, a freshman at Baylor in the '50s, was studying mathematics on scholarship. Solomon heard a knock at his door one day. It was Vaught, a senior philosophy major at the time.

"I hear you're David Solomon, and I hear you're pretty smart," Vaught said. "All the smart people here major in philosophy."

Solomon would redirect his academic pursuits and go on to be a distinguished professor of philosophy at Notre Dame.

Beatty said Vaught had many traits that made him influential.

He was "spirited and fiery," as well as "a person of great sensitivity," Beatty said. "He loved his students and was loved by his students."

Antoninka called him "a friend and mentor," as well as "an example."

Bowery said, "He stimulated students to perform at the highest level."

Vaught graduated from Baylor as the valedictorian of his class and went on to Yale as a Woodrow Wilson and Danforth Fellow. Then he began a distinguished 30-year professorship at Penn State University, where he became head of the philosophy department and director of graduate studies.

Vaught was invited to Baylor six years ago to continue teaching as distinguished professor of philosophy.

His body of work is large and respected, Beatty said. The last of his completed works is a three-volume work on Augustine that Beatty said is "very important in the history of Augustine scholarship."

Vaught attended high school in Little Rock, Ark., with Robert Baird, former chairman of the philosophy department. The two became "fast, close friends" while studying at Baylor, Baird said.

Baird introduced Vaught at a public lecture by describing him in the same words that Vaught had used to describe one of his own professors at Yale.

"He engages the material with every ounce of his immense energy, and he knows how to speak to both the heads and the hearts of students ... because he takes the issues at stake to be of life-altering importance," Baird said.

Vaught is survived two daughters and three grandchildren. He had a unique relationship with his wife, who helped him better understand philosophical problems, Beatty said.

A memorial service for Dr. Vaught will be held at 2 p.m. Wednesday in Miller Chapel.

Beatty said Vaught was concerned about communicating the importance of "the big ideas," broad philosophical matters of great import in life. Bowery also pointed out this concern.