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Opinion

Obituary: Roy Korfhage: Pitt professor who gave his students much

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By Eleanor Chute, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

When University of Pittsburgh professor Robert Roy Korfhage planted his garden at his Squirrel Hill home, he didn't plant a bed of flowers that were all alike but instead picked an eclectic mix of plants that he could care for individually.

That's how the professor of information sciences cared for his students, too, said his daughter Margaret FitzGerald of Plymouth, Mich.

"He was deeply interested in his students on a very individual basis. Instead of seeing them as 'my class,' he saw them as each student individually. He would take phone calls from his students anytime day or night."

One time when he was teaching at Southern Methodist University, he was surprised to discover that many of his students were football players. A counselor erroneously had told them his was a cake course.

Dr. Korfhage didn't water down the course for them, but he addressed their interests by arranging for them to talk with the Dallas Cowboys about how they used computers.

Dr. Korfhage, who retired from Pitt in the summer and became professor emeritus, died of cancer on Friday at his home at the age of 67.

Throughout his career, Dr. Korfhage was involved in computers.

He earned a bachelor's degree in engineering mathematics in 1952 from the University of Michigan, having taken the first two computing courses the university offered.

After working as a computer programmer for the United Aircraft Corp. for two years, he returned to the University of Michigan. He met his wife, Ann, whom he married in 1955, at the university. He earned a doctorate in math in 1962.

He taught at North Carolina State College, now North Carolina State



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University, Purdue University and SMU before joining the Pitt faculty in 1986. At SMU, students selected him as one of the best teachers.

He wrote 10 books and was most proud of "Information Storage and Retrieval," which won the 1997 prize for the best professional scholarly book in computer science by the Association of American Publishers and the 1998 prize for the best book in information science by the American Society of Information Science.

The question of how to retrieve the most pertinent information from vast amounts of information intrigued Dr. Korfhage.

The last project on which he was working was called VIBE, for Visual Information Browsing Environment. This project is addressing the problem of how someone using the Internet or another large data source can turn up hundreds of listings but can have difficulty sorting out which ones were most useful.

VIBE, which other researchers will continue, is developing a visual system so that, for example, a series of dots could show how closely the listings matched the request.

Dr. Korfhage long saw how important being able to receive information would become.

"I remember in the '70s during the oil crisis, he said to me, 'This is oil now, but I have to tell you that information is what is going to be the real commodity,'" FitzGerald said.

A member of the Association for Computing Machinery, Dr. Korfhage was past chairman of its Special Interest Group in Information Retrieval and served two terms on the ACM council. In the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineering, he helped to start the Symposium on Visual Languages.

At Pitt, Dr. Korfhage developed student exchange programs with Molde College and Hedmark College in Norway and was an adjunct professor at Molde College.

At holidays, it was common for foreign students too far from their homes to join the Korfhage family for dinner.

Toni Carbo, dean of information sciences, said, "He was an extraordinary teacher and mentor to students and junior faculty. Many of his graduates are working in very prestigious universities around the world. I think that is probably his greatest legacy.

"Bob took an interest in their whole lives, not just their intellectual lives. He had such a good sense of humor. Sometimes scholars seem remote, but he wasn't that way at all."

She considers Dr. Korfhage one of the world's leading scholars in information retrieval.

Besides his math and computer skills, he had a wide array of interests, including gardening, music, painting, photography, stamp collecting, antique collecting, cooking and traveling. The family had hundreds of plants around the house, many of them cactuses. He enjoyed playing Dave Brubeck jazz pieces on the piano.


In addition to his wife and daughter, Dr. Korfhage is survived by another daughter, Lisa Pannel of Minneapolis; two sons, Willard of Newton, Mass.; and David of Princeton, N.J.; a sister, Marilyn Toppel of Scottsdale, Ariz.; and one grandson.

There will be a memorial service at 2 p.m. tomorrow at the First United Methodist Church of Pittsburgh.

Burial will be private.

Memorial contributions may be made to the Robert R. Korfhage Award, University of Pittsburgh, School of Information Sciences, 505 Information Sciences Building, 135 N. Bellefield Ave., Pittsburgh 15260.

Arrangements were handled by H. Samson Funeral Home.

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