



## Professor William W. 'Bill' Thomas

December 5, 1940 - June 11, 2013

SCHENECTADY – Professor William W. "Bill" Thomas, 72, died at home on Tuesday, June 11, 2013.

The College mourns the loss of William "Bill" Thomas, professor emeritus of French who for three decades dedicated himself to worrying over the many details of international study and accumulating lifelong friends who were transformed by a term abroad. He died at his home on at the age of 72.

The retired director of International Programs understood that, more than learning a language and a culture, the most valuable thing a student gains from a term abroad is independence. When he retired two years ago, letters poured in from grateful alumni. "Prof. Thomas has impacted the lives of thousands of students through these programs," wrote Steve Hartman '87. "He made the world smaller and more familiar for the Union students who took the adventure. He had unending passion, was always exploring new countries, and continuously built the program with the energy of the faculty and students." An avuncular figure, Thomas lightly admonished students to be on time for travel and to be courteous in their host locales. But he also bailed them out of trouble when an exploration went awry.

He seemed to recall the biographical details of every student he'd ever met, and he made something of a second career out of cultivating those relationships. He kept track of their jobs, spouses and children through phone calls, letters, emails and Facebook. Alumni were frequent visitors to his office, crammed tight with books and French newspapers. Many of his students were children of alumni.

An engaging conversationalist who often held court outside the Humanities Building during smoking breaks, he chronicled the vagaries of campus life with his gently sarcastic humor. He often knew the most interesting -- but sometimes unprintable -- details of campus news, and was a frequent source and sounding board to colleagues in the Office of Communications.

A native of Buffalo, the son of the late Wilfrid and Mabel Schaffer Thomas, Bill fell in love with the small college atmosphere at Hamilton College, where he majored in French but did not study abroad. He earned his doctorate from the State University of New York at Buffalo and taught there and at Université d'Orleans-Tours before joining Union in 1969.

His efforts have been recognized by Union and other institutions. Czech Technical University in Prague awarded him a medal for arranging an exchange of engineering students. York University in England, another longtime exchange partner with Union, made him an honorary fellow in a grand commencement ceremony at York Minster Cathedral. In 1992, he received the Alumni Gold Medal from Union's Alumni Council. Survivors include his former wife, Ann Manning Thomas, of Schenectady; his son, Andrew S. Thomas, and his wife, Heloise Goodman; of New York City; their twins, Ms. Chase and Mr. Jasper Thomas; and a daughter, Caroline E. Thomas of Washington, D.C.

A celebration of Bill's life will be held on Sunday, at the Rossi & Ditoro Funeral Home, Union at N. Jay Streets from 1 to 3 pm.

Interment is planned at the Union College Plot in Vale Cemetery. Memorial contributions may be made in Bill's memory to the William W. Thomas Endowed Professorship of French in care of College Relations, Union College, 807 Union St., Schenectady, NY 12308.

# Comments

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“ Ann, On sending a change of email address announcement to my full address book I was delighted and surprised to receive responses, sweet, witty, newsy, from people with whom I hadn't exchanged words in many years. One I didn't hear from (got an automated address deleted announcement instead) was Wilf. It only took a short search to find out what happened. It fills me with sadness that such a lovely man should pass on so soon, and with regret that I haven't made the requisite effort to nourish a friendship which was so central to my life that long time back. It is a bittersweet reminder for me to get back in touch with those who are still around. I hope you are well, and that your children (and grandchildren I see) give you pleasure. Charlie Fox

**Charlie Fox - Jamaica Plain, MA - college friend** - August 16, 2013 at 12:00 AM

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“ Dear Ann and Family,  
I fondly remember Prof. Thomas as my teacher of my Freshman Preceptorial class in the Fall of 1985. He had always delivered his 'teaching' with wit, tact, and intent. He greatly eased my transition into college life ex loco parentis.  
Prof. Thomas was not only my one-time teacher, but he was also a Hamilton Classmate of my Father, the late Jack Fraser (Hamilton '61), who wiled away many hours playing Hearts and attending "Sherry Club" meetings with 'Wilf' Thomas.  
During my years at Union, I would check in with Prof. Thomas, even if just in passing on my way to class. He seemed to know every passing student in some capacity.  
Also, at the home football games, I often positioned myself nearby in order to enjoy his running commentary on the proceedings with fellow Professors.  
My deepest sympathies to you and your family.

**Andrew Fraser - Austin, TX - Former Student** - June 28, 2013 at 12:00 AM

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“ There are some whose gentle words touch you for the rest of your life. "Bill" Thomas was one of those. I will never forget your words, your care for all of us and your easy smile. Thank you for giving so much. You have moved many hearts in your life.  
With gratitude to have known you,  
Axel

**Axel Baumann - Brooklyn, NY - Former Student** - June 16, 2013 at 12:00 AM

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“ The Term Abroad Program in Rennes in 1974 with Prof. Thomas was one of the outstanding experiences of my life! I am still in touch with my "french family " today and I visited them in their summer home in the 1980"s. The Term Abroad kindled my love for international travel. The reunion of "Rennes Alumni " that Prof. Thomas hosted a few years ago was a wonderful event! It was great to see Prof. Thomas again and amazingly he remembered everyone and all the craziness, in particular, Fall Term in Rennes, 1974!

I feel blessed to have known Bill Thomas. My condolences to his family.

**Claudia Turner - Schenectady, NY - former student** - June 16, 2013 at 12:00 AM

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“ I was a French Literature major at Union ('76). Of the dozen classes I took in my major, at least half were with Bill. This wasn't due to a simple overlap between my interests and his classes; I enjoyed his teaching and his teaching style. He inspired in me a desire to go into teaching, which I finally indirectly did, albeit nearly thirty years later. I didn't participate in a term abroad; Bill agreed that since I'd already spent three years in a French-language school, and had spent two Christmas vacations and the intervening summer outside of Marseilles, all I'd really get from a term in Orléans would be different weather. He knew when enforcing a rule made sense, and when it didn't. Additionally, he was the fraternity advisor for my fraternity (Delta Chi). As such, he formed many close friendships with people who never went near the Humanities building. Even twenty years after my last class with him, if he saw me at a football game, he never once had to search his memory for my name. I deeply regret never having stopped by his office during the last two decades, just to say hello and catch him up on my various activities. As with so many things, it always seemed that I could do that later. My condolences go out to your entire family, and to all those who knew him. Sincerely, Peter Perrone

**Peter Perrone - Schenectady, NY - Former Student** - June 15, 2013 at 12:00 AM