Radford professor Joe Jones was dedicated to seeing students succeed

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Joe Jones had an impressive resume — multiple degrees in various subjects — and was a prolific traveler, but he’s remembered for how he could use that brilliance and worldliness to improve the lives of his students.

Joe Frank Jones III, who joined Radford University in August 2011 as a philosophy and religious studies professor and as chairman of its department, died Tuesday. He was 65.

“I’ve been in higher education for nearly 30 years, and I never met anyone so widely respected and beloved as Joe Jones,” said Kate Hawkins, dean of the College of Humanities and Behavioral Sciences at Radford University.

Jones spent many years of his life in various countries because of the U.S. Air Force. His father was in the Air Force, taking the family to places such as the Philippines and Germany.

Jones wrote in his biography on the school’s website that he “majored in beer” when he attended Clemson University when he was 17 years old, so he flunked out and enlisted in the Air Force and served in the Vietnam War. After he was discharged at 23, he traveled abroad for about 10 years, which changed his view of the world.

He eventually went back to school. He graduated from Armstrong State College in Georgia, then earned a master’s degree in philosophy of science from the University of Georgia and a master’s and doctorates in philosophy, Greek philosophy, metaphysics and various others from Florida State University by 1983.

“What led him to philosophy was him making peace with the world around him,” said Carter Turner, an associate professor of religious studies at Radford University.

Jones was a professor and chairman of the department of religion and philosophy at Barton College in North Carolina before joining Radford University. Hawkins said his proudest achievement was the creation of the bioethics certificate, developed through a partnership between Radford University and the Jefferson College of Health Sciences, and intended to teach students about health care ethics, consultation and policy.
The outgoing and humorous professor had a deep interest in the success of his students, and he sometimes considered his conversations about philosophical issues with his students to be therapy for himself.

Current Radford student Mo Salarkia took a course on existential philosophy with Jones in fall 2013, and he said Jones always found a way to make the class engaging. Salarkia, a business major, once found himself a little in over his head with the topic that he chose for a lengthy paper, but Jones helped him through it.

“This was a really genuine professor,” said Salarkia, who stayed in touch with Jones through this most recent winter break. “He really wanted to see his students succeed.”

Tod Burke, an associate dean and professor of criminal justice at Radford University, said the admiration of his students could be seen frequently at the lunch table he shared each day with Jones and a few other professors.

“There’s nothing that he wouldn’t go out of his way to do for anyone,” Burke said. “You’d see that with his students. They’d interrupt us at the lunch table and say, ‘What a great lecture, Dr. Jones.’”

Turner also sat at that lunch table every day for three years. He said Jones always made the person he was talking to feel like the most important person in the world.

“When I was a junior faculty in the department, and I was struggling to write, he said, ‘You should just take the summer and instead of writing, ride your bike.’ And I did, I rode and my brain got clear,” Turner said.

Turner rode his bike for a year, and when he did an organized 100-mile ride, he reached the top of a mountain, and there was Jones, waiting to congratulate him.

“He was part brother, father and friend,” Turner said. “I really loved him.”

Arrangements are by Mullins Funeral Home and Crematory in Radford.