

A gift from history, to the future

In recent years, the Department of History has been awarding a \$1,000 prize to its most promising students, thanks to the generosity and initiative of two former history majors who have wanted to honor their friend and former professor, **John Karras**. **Joseph Stroble '90** and **JoAnn Kaitz '89** have been supporting what has been called the J. P. Karras Leadership in History Award since 2003.

Last March, **Daniel Crofts**, who succeeded Karras as department chair from 1996 to this year, initiated a campaign among history majors of the past 40-plus years to raise the \$25,000 needed to establish an endowment that will allow the award to be made annually in perpetuity. The effort reached its goal by the end of the year.

Karras has been teaching history at the College for 47 years and is largely responsible for building the department. His own interest has been ancient and medieval empires, but with world and military history always in the balance. He served as department chair for 23 years and helped build a faculty with an exceptional range of historical expertise.

Those who have taught with and been taught by Karras seem to agree on a number of reasons why people might want to name an award for him. They find him brilliant, challenging, fair, stimulating, demanding, and joyously fun to be around.

He came to the College almost directly from Rutgers, having spent the summer of 1958 tending bar in Asbury Park. Karras filled a last-minute vacancy a few days before classes began. He had also spent a tour in the Army, where he says Officers Candidate School taught him "all I really needed to know about teaching." He's never been interested in advanced degrees, but his pansophic mind



Karras poses with a "recruiting poster" and a mace, gifts of a British historian and some former students.

and leadership skills have convinced many others that degrees may be overrated.

And how does he do it? One reason surely is his ability to read rapidly—800 words a minute, and that is with his left eye only. Before losing the sight in his right eye, his rate was 1,000.

Rose Mary Sheldon '69, now a professor of history at Virginia Military Institute, says, "He put us over the hurdles; we thought nothing was ever good enough for him. No matter what

we had read, he had read more. But he was fair and very, very funny. He taught me everything I know about excellence in teaching. ... He was then as he is now, larger than life. His presence can fill a room, and his encyclopedic knowledge of his subjects is still awesome after all these years. In an era when 'just o.k.' will do in most areas, John Karras has never compromised his standards. When one gets an A from him, one can take it to the bank. I can't think of a better standard to emulate."

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Those standards include the need for coherent, declarative, and informative sentences, as well as supporting evidence and thoughtful analysis.

But his reputation for toughness may be taken with a grain of salt. It's a toss-up whether he prefers reading Thucydides, the Athenian historian, to Aristophanes, the comic playwright. He used to keep a warning notice posted in his office: "The flogging will continue until morale improves." A while ago he was given a vicious-looking wooden mace, but he says "I'm afraid to use it because it might break."

The Karras award goes to the senior or seniors who the history department faculty members feel best exemplify the Karras approach: a mix of passion and humor, seriousness, and fun. The award is based on three standards: a strong academic record, an ability to write about history with originality and grace, and evidence of leadership in the classroom, the department, the College, and the wider community.



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