

## **Judy Holdener (nee Newhauser) Class of 1987**

---

I entered college in the fall of 1983 completely clueless about higher education. My father was a steelworker (having suffered from many years of paranoid schizophrenia), and my two older brothers had already attempted a college degree at KSU and dropped out. I had come from Ravenna High School, where I experienced the state's longest teachers strike, and I worked multiple jobs to pay my way through school. The advisor I was assigned upon my arrival at Kent recommended that I enter the Honors program (based in large part on my math placement score), and I decided this man was not to be trusted. Did he not see that I was at serious risk of failing out? I wrote him off entirely and was careful to read the Student Bulletin (a copy of which I still have!) and all policies, myself. It wasn't until I met Joe Diestel that I started to trust the academic system. I landed in Joe's linear algebra class in the spring of my sophomore year, and although this was 32 years ago, I still have vivid memories of that class. Joe taught in cutoffs and without shoes, and he had the students presenting proofs at the chalkboard. I recall presenting my proof of the Rank-Nullity Theorem, and Joe was visibly excited to see that I understood the result in full. (I had not spoken in class prior to that point.) I thoroughly loved working through that proof, and it remains a favorite of mine today.

My first visit to Joe's office was not much different from what others have already recounted. He explained to me the importance of the three "B"s in his life, and when he got to the third "B," he opened his desk drawer to reveal a big bottle of booze. This took me by complete surprise, of course, but the gesture put me entirely at ease. He was not afraid to be himself, and I appreciated his open and genuine nature. I was also appreciative of his willingness to accept his students for who they were. He treated me with immense respect, and he encouraged me like no other teacher had before. He was also generous with his time, explaining the academic landscape to me – a terrain that was entirely unfamiliar. He volunteered to offer an independent study with me and met with me weekly to share his enthusiasm of mathematics. I found his stories about mathematicians, mathematical results, and math conferences to be inspirational. When I was a senior, he explained the graduate school application process to me, and with his guidance I ultimately landed a fellowship at the University of Illinois in Urbana, where his co-author and friend J. Jerry Uhl provided continued support and encouragement. My two mentors were not much different, as far as I could tell...except in one of the "B"s. Jerry was not much of a fan of baseball, but he loved his Bernese Mountain Dogs.

On the morning I learned of Joe's passing, I was actually drafting a presentation for ninety-nine incoming first-year students at Kenyon College about the "student-advisor relationship." What a strange twist of fate. This was part of the orientation programming at Kenyon, and I was supposed to explain to these students how they should be making use of their academic advisor and what the expectations are for students and advisors. I began my presentation by describing my relationship with Joe Diestel and the positive influence he had on my life. I included several pictures of him, including the one with Jerry Uhl at my wedding (below), and I encouraged the students to seek out an equally meaningful mentor. I explained that an advisor does not have to share a student's race or gender to be a transformative force, but that he or she should be

somebody who instills trust. I presented the talk knowing full well that only a small percentage would find an advisor who would measure up.

My sympathy goes out to Joe's children and family. I hope they can find peace, and even pleasure, knowing that Joe has had such a profound influence on so many.

