

Don Wiles, Professor and Founder of CURA Tribute by Peter Watson

Don Wiles probably epitomized what is good about Carleton more than anyone else I have known here. He was loyal to the institution in a way that very few people are. When I arrived in 1970 he was the first person I met after the person who had invited me to come, and his first remark was; “Why don’t we go and have a beer”. We stayed friends from that time on.

There is no point in simply rehashing his career. He taught for 52 years, a record that I suspect will never be beaten. We ended up jointly teaching the First Year Seminar in Science: he coordinated it for several years, and then carried on teaching in it when I took over.

But his formal record does not do justice to the man. He liked being introduced as the hottest professor in Carleton, which invariably produced baffled and slightly embarrassed looks from the students. This was a leftover from his first job, where he was resident radio chemist at the Port Hope nuclear facility. Because of the sloppy radiation protection at the time, he was loaded with Cesium 131, a radioactive isotope, to the extent that when he started at MIT he was used by the radiation protection branch as a standard.

He is the only person I have ever heard of who was not allowed to read his own Masters thesis. He wrote this at McMaster and because it dealt with the processing of various radio-active materials, it was immediately classified by the US government. He related how he needed to consult it while doing his Ph. D. at MIT and his supervisor had it in a locked safe in his office. He was conveniently called out of the office and left the safe unlocked long enough for Don to look at it.

We played squash for many years. He was a much better player than me, but he had breathing issues, caused (again) by careless safety protocols in one of the labs he had worked in. Part of his job had been machining parts out of beryllium, which is notorious for causing lung damage from the dust produced. To win at squash, I simply had to get him running back and forward across the court for long enough that he started gasping.

We saw him for the last time back in the spring. By this stage he was confined to a wheelchair, in physically failing health but still the same lucid and slightly abrasive person I appreciated so much.