A Celebration of a Remarkable Life

The auditorium in the new Marvin I. Danto Engineering Development Center (EDC) swelled with memories of the college’s immediate past dean, Ralph H. Kummler, as students, alumni, faculty, colleagues and staff gathered to remember him.

Kummler, a popular dean who stepped down last August to spend more time with his family, he said, was being honored by the college community eight days after he died unexpectedly Dec. 7 from an episode of arrhythmia while on his way to his office at the College of Engineering.

“Many of my associations of the College of Engineering were with Ralph H. Kummler,” said former WSU President Irvin D. Reid, as he, and a long lineup of speakers shared their memories of Kummler, who was 69.

To many, Kummler was the College of Engineering, one speaker said, punctuating a theme that ebbed through the stream of people and their testimonies.

Among those in attendance were Kummler’s immediate family members — his wife, Jean; three sons, Jeff, Brad and Randy; and their wives. University President Jay Noren and Provost Nancy Barrett attended and shared their remembrances as well.

“His death was untimely, and put us all into shock,” said Mumtaz Usmen, who took over the deanship from Kummler last summer and now serves as interim dean through a challenging period of transition for the college.

People arrived and settled into the auditorium as three WSU music students performed Beethoven’s Minuet and Andante and Cantabile from the second serenade on violin, viola and cello. A slide presentation cycled on the screen above the stage depicting Kummler’s life at the college stretching back through most of his 39 years at the college to when he was appointed assistant professor of chemical engineering in 1970.

“I served six years with an amazing mentor,” said Michele Grimm, associate dean of academic affairs. “He reminded everyone that their role was the success of students.”

Eight current and former faculty members of the Department of Chemical Engineering shared their personal stories about Kummler when he was chair of the department from 1974 until 1993. Yinlun Huang, professor of chemical engineering, shared how Kummler helped him achieve tenure faculty status two years after Huang had been offered a faculty position before being told that it had been changed to a two-year non-tenure track position.

Erhard Rothe, professor of chemical engineering, shared how a rift developed in the department when former Dean Ali Cambel established a research institute hiring outside of the department. Then Kummler became department chair. “He did a wonderful job,” Rothe said, and “after a while, people trusted him.” The rift was reconciled.

Speaker after speaker built a strong narrative weaving personal stories of how Kummler had personally made a difference in their lives.

Mary Savalle, BSME’07, said that when she was a freshman, Kummler had invited her to present her research experience at the Cairo International Conference on the Environment. Savalle’s father was concerned about the trip for such a young woman – she was only 18 at the time – but agreed when Kummler said he would take personal responsibility for his daughter. “I am one of thousands of people who had him in my life,” Savalle said. “I am going to miss him forever.”

The university is making plans for a university-wide tribute to Kummler this coming spring in conjunction with the commemoration of the courtyard area between the main college building and the EDC to be named “Kummler Commons.”

Please share your remembrances online by emailing dreich@eng.wayne.edu.
The College of Engineering at Wayne State University has lost one of its popular leaders and immediate former dean in the sudden death of Ralph H. Kummler, who succumbed to a heart attack as he drove to his office early Monday morning, Dec. 7.

Kummler was revered for his tireless dedication to students and the promotion of the College of Engineering, as well as the strong relationships he developed with alumni and industry. He is also considered to be the single-most individual responsible for the building of the new Marvin I. Danto Engineering Development Center at Wayne State, which was dedicated April 28, 2009.

The 69-year-old former dean was driving from his home in Commerce Township to his office at the College of Engineering near downtown Detroit when his car veered into the median strip of the John C. Lodge Freeway (M-10) and came to a stop. Ironically, a Wayne State student was the first to reach the car and find him unresponsive. He was pronounced dead a short while later at Sinai Grace Hospital in Detroit.

Kummler had been dean of the college for eight years until August when he announced he was stepping down to spend more time with his family. At that time, he said he wasn’t sure whether he would be taking a sabbatical – the traditional leave of one academic year every seven years – or remain to teach and support the college in other roles.

It turned out that he remained active in fundraising activities. At the time of his death, he was involved in creating and closing the “loops” – the strong connections with alumni and industrial partners he developed that often led to financial support for the college, according to the current interim dean, Mumtaz Usmen.

In a message to the Wayne State University community, President Jay Noren said about Kummler: “He was a profound and creative thinker, as well as an enthusiastic cheerleader and tireless fundraiser for the College of Engineering. And even more important, he was a universally admired member of the Wayne State family.”

Plans in process before his death to dedicate the courtyard area between the college’s administration wing and the Engineering Development Center to be called “Ralph H. Kummler Commons” speaks to his popularity. As faculty, staff, colleagues and students at the college gathered in hallways and corridors in the hours after his death to share and process the news, a look back at the comments made at his retirement in August formed common themes about the man.

Ralph H. Kummler
November 1, 1940 - December 7, 2009
He was a leader stretching back to his youth when he was the class president of his high school in New Jersey, said Walt Bryzik, professor and chair of the Department of Mechanical Engineering. “And he was the chairman of the Wayne State Faculty Assembly when he was almost a brand new professor in 1973 or 1974. He worked it from both ends no matter what end he was involved with.”

Kummler was a strong supporter of the student. And he was the college’s greatest cheerleader. “His heart was for the school,” said Bryzik. “His heart was for the students, for alumni, for industrial partners.”

Throughout his career, Kummler was very active in engineering associations and societies, particularly the Engineering Society of Detroit, and the connections benefited the college greatly. From the day he joined the chemical engineering faculty through his final days in August as dean of the college, Kummler’s heart had always been devoted to the college. He was always about connections, that is, fostering relationships with students, faculty, and alumni in industry that moved the college forward.

Kummler joined the faculty of chemical engineering as an associate professor in 1970 and was appointed full professor in 1975. He served as chairman of Chemical and Metallurgical (now Materials) Engineering from 1974 until 1993 and as associate dean for research from 1997 to 2001. He also was director of the Hazardous Waste Management Programs at WSU. He was appointed interim dean in May 2001, and became permanent dean in August 2004.

Kummler led numerous research and planning studies of environmental issues in the state of Michigan, including combined storm overflow studies on the Rouge and Detroit Rivers, industrial waste control, landfill gas emission studies, air pollution dispersion, auto exhaust testing and environment, and safety analysis of the city of Flint Department of Public Works.

He served on many pivotal committees and commissions throughout the state involving waste management and environment control. He was a principal leader in establishing and organizing the International Conference on Energy and Environment held in Egypt since 1989. He earned numerous awards, including the 1990 ESD Affiliate Council’s Gold Award, a 1994 and 2004 ESD Distinguished Service Award, and the 1999 Horace Rackham Humanitarian Award.

Kummler is survived by his wife, Jean, their sons, Jeff, Brad and Randy, and their families. A funeral service was held Friday, Dec. 11, at the All Saints Lutheran Church in Hartland, and was followed by a luncheon reception at the church.

A special memorial gathering for Kummler — A Celebration of a Remarkable Life — was held, Tuesday, Dec. 15, in the Marvin I. Danto Engineering Development Center auditorium.

The Kummler family requested that in lieu of flowers, contributions be made to the Ralph and Jean Endowed Scholarship Fund. Contributions are being matched dollar for dollar.

If you wish to contribute to his fund, please mail to Wayne State University, Attention: Fund Office, 5475 Woodward Ave., Detroit, MI, 48202.
This is THE most difficult note I’ve ever written.

Ralph and I were high school sweethearts – my best friend – the love of my life. Ralph was a loving and devoted husband, father, father-in-law, and Pa-pa. He was also devoted to Wayne State University, especially the College of Engineering.

It was wonderful that Ralph was able to attend the 2009 Night of the Stars where the college bestowed upon him one of the highest tributes – and just think, he was able to hear in person how he touched and influenced others’ lives. Ralph was dedicated to education and the pursuit of knowledge. He also was dedicated to bettering the world.

Thank you to all for your comforting words and sharing your memories of Ralph. He’d be so happy to know the Endowed Scholarship Fund for the College of Engineering will continue.

It has been an honor and a privilege to share this humble, gentle, yet passionate soul with you. Ralph will be SO missed as he was truly an amazing and unique man.

So what now? You ask the question –

We carry on as Ralph would have wanted – no – expected us to do and we do our BEST.

I will continue my journey with Ralph in my heart always, as it has been since 1957.

Love,

Jeannie Kummler
I was so sad to hear about Ralph Kummler passing away. I taught at Wayne State's Chemical Engineering Department from 1972 to 1982. Ralph was a colleague and then served as the chair of the department. Ralph most of all was a wonderful human being, generous with his time and aware of other people's needs and feelings. He was always optimistic and upbeat. His service and dedication were rightly acknowledged by The Service To Society Award he received from the AICHE way back in the '70s.

I recall when I first arrived at Wayne State as a young assistant professor and we had in the department a lively discussion about how to spend some budget for equipment among the various faculty. I recall Ralph suggesting to give all the funds to the two young assistant professors. Ralph has a rare combination of being both honest, fair and flexible at the same time. He was the best chair I ever served under. He cared deeply about Wayne State and about the city of Detroit. Chemical Engineering at Wayne State will never be the same without Ralph, yet he molded it by giving so much to the department, the profession and to the community.

Ralph cared about students, minorities and faculty in need of support and encouragement. His upbeat spirit and optimism were contagious. He and his wife Jean were fun to be with, especially during the many wild parties we had at Ed Fisher's house. I miss going to lunch with him, Ed, Mel, Esin and others at the Traffic Jam. Ralph was a wonderful father and together with Jean raised their three sons to have good values and lead successful lives.

I learned a lot from Ralph, both professionally and personally. I will miss Ralph very much despite being away from Wayne for such a long time.

Jacob Jorne
Professor of Chemical Engineering
University of Rochester