

Memorial Minute for Alfonso Procaccini
Written and read by Giovanna Bellesia
November 29, 2023

Joy, warmth, a passion for knowledge, these are the words that best describe Alfonso Procaccini, beloved professor and scholar of Italian literature, who passed away peacefully in his home on Friday, December 16, 2022, in the loving care of his wife, Ariane Vuono.

Born in the hilltop hamlet of Pettoranello del Molise, Italy, on January 1, 1945, Alfonso immigrated to the United States at the age of 10. The family settled in Kingston, NJ, where Alfonso's love of learning and bonds to the Italian community took firm root. After graduating from Princeton, he earned his doctorate in Italian literature in 1975 at Johns Hopkins University and taught at Yale before joining the Italian Department of Smith College for 37 years until his retirement in 2018.

Alfonso was a latter-day Renaissance man delighting in pursuits both physical and intellectual: he enjoyed gardening, cooking, painting landscapes and still lifes, translating, and listening to music, especially opera. He read widely and cultivated the fine art of conversation. He regularly entertained friends, colleagues and students with tasty regional Italian dishes, stories of his adventures, and an occasional accordion concert. However, nothing made him happier than spending time with his family; he was devoted to his parents, wife, and three children, and he adored his grandchildren.

Bob Merritt, Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences served as Dean of the Faculty during a time when the College needed to reduce the size of the faculty. He described his interaction with Alfonso in a way that really brings him back to life for all of us who knew him: “As you can imagine, every chair responded with passion citing numbers of majors and enrollments, explaining contributions to interdisciplinary programs, ... but Alfonso's response was truly unique. We were standing in my office door at the conclusion of our budget meeting

when I said ‘Alfonso, wouldn't a minor rather than a major in Italian be sufficient?’ Alfonso put his arm around my shoulders, gazed into my eyes and said ‘Bob, let me tell you about Italian.’ And so began a discourse on Italian and art, Italian and music, Italian and literature and on and on until I think he ended with Italian and food. He was passionate but what was truly remarkable was the joy he took in the opportunity to educate a colleague about Italian. By the time he finished, I was fairly certain that any reduction in Italian might lead to the collapse of the college curriculum as a whole (and possibly even dining services). Every chair responded with passion, only Alfonso with joy.”

Alfonso’s famous Dante course incorporated many history and philosophy lessons as well as numerous visits to the Smith Art Museum. His class on *Consuming Passions: Eating and Reading* introduced students to the anthropology of food decades before the flourishing of cultural studies and figured on the pages of *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Alfonso directed the Junior Year Abroad in Florence three times. Students who were lucky enough to be part of his groups continue to talk about the everlasting impact he had on their lives and how grateful they were –and still are– for his ability to see who each one of them truly was. He inspired and charmed generations of Smith and Five-College students who cherished what they called “The Procaccini Approach,” a way of living every moment to the fullest, and being resilient in the face of any challenge. Such was Alfonso's impact on our Smith students in Florence that a fund was set up in his name by grateful parents to benefit students during their junior year abroad in Italy.

At his memorial celebration last April, Ariel Saiber, recently appointed Charles S. Singleton Professor of Italian Studies at Johns Hopkins eloquently described Alfonso’s legacy:

“Professor Procaccini, for me, was the most majestic Giant Sequoia tree...His branches extended upwards, downwards, in all directions, ever-gathering the most radiant knowledge, digesting it, and transmitting it to the countless students who sat sheltered at his roots. A mere sapling, I strove to become strong enough to grow alongside his arboreal network; never would I have imagined that I would become part of it, now training others where he had trained: the rootbed of Charles Singleton’s Johns Hopkins. You, *professore*, are ... the root of my life’s work as a scholar of Dante. And you are the root to so many others, and the others who come after them, and after them. The sequoia’s symbolism is that of longevity, strength, and energy. You continue, through your children, your loved ones, your colleagues, and your students to flourish as all three.”

Buon viaggio Alfonso, la tua gioia vive nei nostri cuori. You were, and still are, the heart of our Italian Department family.