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By LAUREN VINCENT

Henry Brooks Adams once wrote: “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.”

This could easily be applied to the life and passion of Tom Lewis, a beloved professor of many years at Oklahoma Panhandle State University (OPSU). “Tom touched and influenced a legion of students since he first began teaching English and humanities in 1987,” wrote Dr. Sara Jane Richter, Dean of the School of Liberal Arts, shortly after his death in late February. “Besides being a well-respected and beloved instructor, he advised English majors and pre-law students, was commencement coordinator for many years, and helped to advise Anglistics (English Club). For a time, he served as the sponsor of the campus black student organization. Last year, the 2009 senior class named him Outstanding Faculty Member.”

Tom Lewis was posthumously awarded Professor Emeritus status Saturday, May 14, at OPSU’s commencement ceremonies. Tom’s wife, Charla, and daughter, Robbi, received the award in his absence. “It was during the ceremony, the graduation, it was really kind of like a proclamation and they put it in a frame and gave it to us,” said Charla Lewis. “It means a lot to me. It’s a lot of validation for everything that he did. I mean, he loved to teach the students and it was good that he got recognized for doing something that he loved to do.”

After the ceremony, several past students expressed their sentiments to Charla and Robbi.

“There was a complete stranger that my daughter, Robbi, and I didn’t even know that stopped and said how much he appreciated that we would accept that for Tom,” Lewis said. “He thought that was pretty neat.”

Tom Lewis died Sunday evening, Feb. 28, after a long fight with pulmonary fibrosis. His wife shared their story.

“It came on gradually, he was first diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. We were taking trips up to Oklahoma City every so often for check-ups and to try new medication and stuff like that. He all of a sudden got worse in 2003, in February or so of that year. The doctor in Oklahoma City didn’t catch it, or he might have stopped it before it got too bad. In the fall of 2003 Tom finally

got in to National Jewish in Denver, they're the premier of doctors in the country, in the world actually. They got him on some different medicines and different treatments and it stopped it from getting any worse and actually got a little bit better.

"He kept working, driving back and forth from Liberal to Goodwell – to OPSU – for several years. He could function, he could walk, he could even go upstairs though it took him a while, and he could teach and have discussions with the students and stuff. As long as he watched what he was doing and didn't get carried away he was just like a normal person.

"But then in 2007, he kind of started to have more problems. So the doctors at National Jewish tried some new medicine and that stopped it again but it wasn't going to get any better this time. It was too hard for him to drive back and forth to work so his dean, Sara Richter, and the president of the university, decided that if Tom would be able to teach online that would be a good thing. They didn't want to lose him because he was such a good teacher. So he started teaching online in 2008 and mainly stayed in contact with everybody via Facebook or email or the courses. And so he stayed in contact with people through that.

"He just kept getting progressively worse as he stayed home. We bought a scooter so he wouldn't have to walk. He only had the scooter for a year and then we decided that was too hard for him to steer because it took too much muscle control with his arms. So we went to a power chair and he had that for six months before he passed. Once he stayed home, he kept getting worse and he couldn't do as much. It was just really taxing for him."

Life had to change drastically for the family of Tom as his health deteriorated. Many sacrifices were made by those who loved him.

"I pretty much had to help Tom do everything," Lewis said. "And my parents moved in with us so my mom could be here and help him if he needed anything while I was at work. We always had to make sure he could contact us if he needed something, in case of an emergency. I didn't want to go out and do things with people because I wanted to be home with Tom, to spend time with him but also in case he needed something I wanted to be there. And there were times when Robbi, our daughter, wanted to do stuff and we just had to say 'I'm sorry hun you can't, I have to be here, I can't take you.'

As the illness began to control every aspect of Tom's life, he managed to keep a strong hold on the most important things.

"Never did it impair his thinking and intellect though," Richter wrote. "Calm, positive, and dignified to the end, Tom was surrounded by those whom he loved and those who loved him."

It is obvious that Tom taught in such a way that truly impacted his students and one in particular chose to give back in response.

"There was one thing that was really special to him," Charla said. "One of his friends – a student, but they're his friends – one of his friends Charles Frisbee works at the movie theatre in Guymon. The same guy owns the one here in town as owns the one in Guymon. In January,

before he died in February, Avatar came out and Tom really wanted to see it. Well Charles, Frisbee is what we call him, came and we were talking to him about it. Frisbee said 'why don't I just set up a private viewing for you?' So in January we had a private viewing of Avatar. Robbi and I went with him, his friend Frisbee and another student, and Frisbee's family came, and we got to take time to see Avatar. It just underlines the extent that people would go to because they cared about him so much, they would do anything for him."

As the love for Tom continues to live on in the hearts of those who knew him, so his impact as a teacher will live on in the minds of his students and all those they in turn impact, into eternity.

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