

Des Moines Register Article by Carlson: Mr. Lyness lives on through students' tributes

By JOHN CARLSON • jcarlson@dmreg.com • February 4, 2009

I got to know Hal Lyness this week.

Not personally, I'm sorry to say. Not to shake hands, say hello and exchange ideas. That's my loss.

Hal died Sunday, and I met him by spending some time with more than 130 of his friends - actually his students - who are using the Internet to honor the man who influenced them so much during his years as a teacher at Boone High School.

"Mr. Lyness was a wonderful man and teacher," one wrote on a special Facebook page created

"He was one of the nicest men in Boone. ... It was always a great day when he was in the building. ... He was one of the sweetest people I ever met. ... Boone was truly blessed to have him for so long."

Teachers who think they won't be remembered should take a couple of minutes and see how one man in Boone affected so many.

"Teaching was more than a job for Mr. Lyness," said Carol Schroeder of Des Moines, who pointed me to the Web site.

"He was an inspiration. Years later you'd run into him on the street, and he'd remember you and some detail about when you were in school. He taught me, my children and was a substitute teacher for my grandchildren. He made you want to learn.

"He was delightful, and people all over the country are contacting each other and using the Internet to share. It's a very cool use of technology. I think Mr. Lyness would be pleased about that."

The thing is, there's no Internet connection in Hal and Betty Lyness' house in Boone. That means Betty, Hal's wife of 60 years, hasn't seen the postings, which have come from New York to California.

"I've heard about what people are doing," Betty said. "Some day I'm sure somebody will show them to me. I'm sure people are saying some very nice things."

She's right about that. Mr. Lyness taught in Boone from 1956 until 1990, and then substituted in the classroom. He made generations of students there excited about history, got them to understand economics and made international events relevant in their lives.

"I'll never forget the lesson he taught about what could happen if we all just saved \$1 a day," wrote Heather Strable from Abilene, Texas.

Others wrote about how Mr. Lyness made them memorize the states and capitals in freshman history class. Then they learned the preamble to the U.S. Constitution. They've never forgotten and they continue to thank their teacher. They wrote about learning economics by reading and talking about what was in the Wall Street Journal, not slogging through dry textbooks.

Then there were the life lessons and the kindnesses never to be forgotten.

"My father became terminally ill the year I was in his junior high history class," remembers Janet McCaskey Johnson of Des Moines.

"Later that summer when he passed away, Mr. Lyness came to our front door, with flowers and a card with a lovely note inside with his famous handwriting.

"Later, when I graduated from high school, there was yet another card in the mailbox from him, telling me how proud my dad would have been."

Another student, Bob Matt, shared the letter Mr. Lyness wrote to his mother on graduation day 1987.

"Congratulations on the graduation of your son," the teacher wrote, "and thanks for our paths having crossed. It's been sheer joy for me."

And there are the students who went on to become teachers, largely because of Mr. Lyness.

"He was one of the biggest influences in my life and the reason I decided to go into the education profession," wrote Shawn Latimer of Des Moines.

"Mr. Lyness was a teacher that I aspire to be," wrote Mindy Cazett Buck, also of Des Moines.

"The greatest teacher I ever had," wrote Sheri Aswegan Lyons of New York City.

He believed in the potential of all people and in the obligation we all have to use our gifts to make a positive impact on the world. ... His beautifully handwritten words of praise on the top of each exam were priceless and motivated me to want to achieve great things."

Cameron Tuhn of Des Moines simply wrote, "He was one of those guys you thought would be around forever."

Maybe not forever. But the words of the students prove that Mr. Lyness, and so many other teachers like him, are with us for a very long time.
