

Letters and Memories of

# Norton Starr

Presented at the celebration

of his retirement from

**Amherst College**

May 29, 2009



My name is Indu Ahluwalia and I graduated in 1984. I got to know Professor Starr during my stay at Delta Phi during my sophomore year.

He was our faculty advisor. I remember his wonderful sense of humor and one thing that stood out to me was his picture from his childhood that went on our fraternity collage. I wish Professor Starr a very happy retirement and all the fun/freedoms that come with it. Thanks.

Sincerely,  
Indu B. Ahluwalia, 84



I sincerely appreciate receiving this email from you, despite the fact that I was actually a political science major who graduated in 2003. But, given my storied history with Professor Starr, I actually find this email quite fitting, and would like to embrace this opportunity to clear the air between us.

Let me relay a story to you about Professor Starr -- who I consider to be one of the most impressive, thoughtful, passionate, hilarious and delightfully peculiar professors I ever had at Amherst. He embodies, literally, the reason that I still feel so infatuated with Amherst as I do today. And I say this with the caveat that he probably doesn't remember me quite as fondly, as you see, still, to this day, despite the fact that he boasts one of the most prolific/impeccable memories I've ever encountered, Professor Starr thinks that it was me, yes me, Jonah Ansell, who drunkenly stole a table from the Mathematics building that was later found in a common room on the third floor of Crossett.

It was not me who stole the table, but rather, the better-looking, taller, more physically fit kid who sat next to my direct left during my fall semester Algebra 11 class in 1999. On some level, I'm flattered that Professor Starr remembers me as him. He went on to become a strong-jawed secret service agent, who I heard once guarded the President (yes! the actual president!) and I have devolved into a perpetually budding screenwriter, who has far-too easily embraced a somewhat typical late-twenties yuppie lifestyle. You see the thing is -- it couldn't have been me who stole the table, because I didn't yet imbibe alcohol at that juncture in my collegiate experience. Yes, I later succumbed to peer pressures, just as I have more-recently succumbed to the societal pressures to make household purchases at Crate and Barrel. So, as he forges into retirement, with the air hopefully clear, let me just say that I'll remember Professor Starr, for the one class I took with him, the one unremarkable grade that I earned, the hours upon hours of one-on-one tutoring sessions that he shared with me in his office, and the massive amounts of yellow chalk inadvertently caked onto his lips, cheeks and mouth at the end of every eighty minute session. Thank you. You will be both sorely missed and dearly remembered. And I do indeed fully intend to write a Norton Starr-inspired character into one of my screenplays. And I will do my part, in sharing your essence with the straight-to-DVD market for lowbrow humor. (My own shortcoming, not his.)

Always,

Jonah Ansell '03

I apologize for the lateness of these memories. I had planned to return for Norton's retirement celebration, but wedding plans for my daughter have intervened.

Memories are naturally disjointed fragments and it is our storytelling genes that weave them into elegant, coherent wholes. Since I seem to be lacking in this genetic inheritance I offer building block fragments.

Fragment 1: A cold winter day and Norton comes into class (Math 22 I think?) dressed in a puffy brown parka and a round brown hat with fur ear flaps. Zaffetti whispers "Nanook of the North". (Norton, we all loved you!)

Fragment 2: I am running with a friend in the field house (at that time it had dirt floor, alas it has now probably been upgraded by some synthetic surface ugh). There on the other side is Professor Norton Starr getting ready to run: thin, somewhat pale and rangy. I think we may have poked fun as boys do. But somewhere slightly below the level of consciousness, it was inspiring. Today you can find me (a less talented math professor) faithfully swimming laps in the pool three days a week.

Fragment 3: Starr's Math 22 take-home final took me 28 hours. During the ordeal I can remember assuming a variety of postures in my room at South College: lying prone on the bed bending over the edge to work on the floor, kneeling on the floor and bent over and rocking as if in agony with an acute stomach ache, on my back with my legs crawling up the wall. It was mathematics through body english and this exam required more than the usual degree of body contortions. The amazing questions were set precisely at the edge of my "challenge boundary"; doable but very tough. But oh how satisfying when complete! (I can only imagine how this all looked to my kind roommate, Roger Turton. He was also in the course but being significantly brighter, he completed the exam in less time.) I mark this exam together with Starr's Math 22 course as the event that made me a mathematician and an analyst in particular. True to my wayward nature I went on to declare an Anthropology major. But if not for Starr's course I would not have gone on to abstract, complex and the other formative undergrad math course, topology out of Willard. I would not have accidentally found my way into a masters program and eventually to a doctorate. Thank you Norton, I still have my worn copy of Buck.

Fragment 4: I learn by phone of my father's sudden death at the end of spring term sophomore year. Friends at Valentine Hall say I should take the day off from washing dishes and they will cover (duh). Such a rush of events... After a painful dreamlike week, I return to campus to face exams, in the background wondering whether I will be able to afford to return (the tuition would be measured in pocket change today but at that time it was significant). Later I learn that Norton has written a letter on my behalf saying that I was worthy student and the administration should make that financially possible. I had made no appeals and I don't know how he even knew about my circumstances. But thanks to him Amherst made it financially possible to stay. Norton has this loveable, self-effacing, mathematically concise (slightly nerdy) style, but underneath shines a heart of pure compassion.

Norton is a key person who knows a wide range of people and finds all kinds of interesting ways to keep them connected. As Malcolm Gladwell notes in *Tipping Point*, these individuals are the glue of society. Norton has been the glue for generations of math students at Amherst. He may retire from teaching classes but I don't think his constitution will allow him to retire from work of connecting people. (Two days ago, out of blue my daughter, who happens to be in number theory, receives an e-mail from Norton detailing recent errata in David Cox's wonderful book, *Primes of the Form  $x^2+ny^2$* . She e-mailed me "is this vintage Norton?". I reply "absolutely, isn't it wonderful!!")

Dave Belding '71 Graduate of Starr's Math 22!



I'm afraid I will not be able to attend the reception for Professor Starr, as I am now a resident of New Zealand. However, rest assured that my heart will be with you all as you farewell the professor. He was a teacher that I have long remembered (I was Amherst '88) with great fondness. It was not only because he achieved the miracle of making multivariable calculus comprehensible (and - gasp! - even fun!) for me but more because he was such a very very caring person.

I became fairly ill during one term that I had a class with Professor Starr, and after several days in the UMass infirmary was finally brought back to campus early one snowy morning by Security. As the police car slowly made its way up the icy hill, I noted without much real interest that the driver of the car behind us was gesticulating madly. I assumed it was out of frustration at the sedate pace imposed by the slick conditions and thought no more about it. No sooner had I reached my dormitory room than my phone rang. It was Professor Starr, and his first words to me were, "Don't you even THINK about coming to my class this morning! You get some rest!" Yes, the crazy man in the car behind us was Professor Starr, trying desperately to communicate that I need not worry about missing class. That was the level of his concern for his students - he understood that to a neurotic if sickly sophomore, braving snow and slush to get to class did in fact make sense. I assure you that if he hadn't phoned, I would have struggled through the wind to get to class instead of staying cozily tucked up in an afghan and continuing to recuperate.

In order to make up the work that I'd missed, I decided to stay at school over the Thanksgiving break. As soon as he heard that, Professor Starr not only insisted upon driving me to the supermarket so I could stock up on groceries, but he also delivered a large sack of Florida grapefruits - AND a grapefruit spoon (the kind with the serrated edge) - with strict orders to eat them "for the Vitamin C".

I have many fond memories of Amherst and as time has passed, I grow ever more conscious of what a privilege it was for me to spend four years at an institution that was so focused on students' growth and welfare. But while there were many faculty whom I liked and respected, Professor Starr - and his grapefruits - will always have a special place in my heart.

Professor Starr, thank you. I don't recall if I ever told you before I graduated how much I appreciated your solicitude and kindness, but I suspect that, like many young people, I just assumed you knew. Memories of our shopping trip still can make me smile even here on the other side of the world and all too many years later. I have been a faculty member in several universities and medical schools now, and your example is the one I always try to follow when dealing with my own students. Thank you.

Best regards always -  
Kira Bacal '88

PS Now that you're retired, why not come visit NZ??

In 1981-82 I was excited to arrive at Amherst but a reluctant Calculus student. I knew some of my math-wiz classmates had Prof. Starr, so I could not imagine why he would be interested in -- or good at -- teaching me... However, with the firm encouragement of my parents (and tuition-payers) and intrigued by Economics, I proceeded with Calculus, and Prof. Starr proved to me that he is one of those special teachers who are excited and effective in teaching earnest students of all aptitudes and objectives. My happiness with his Calculus class emboldened me to plunge into Economics as a second major, and I have been in analytical, quantitative professional schools and roles since then (finance & business). The entire experience -- which began with Prof. Starr -- has made me an even more insistent professional and parent about the importance of understanding the major math concepts at least as far as the class Prof. Starr taught so well.

Thank you, Prof. Starr for teaching me both Calculus and confidence. Congratulations on your retirement and all the Amherst students you have empowered.

All the best,

Francis Barker '85



I'm glad to have had the experience of taking a class with this fine educator. Even after 15 years, I still tell people about the fuzzy bear stickers that Professor Starr put on my freshman calculus homework before handing it back. I think he was trying to console me for my very poor grades. It was a sweet, reassuring gesture, but I've never taken another math class since.

I wish him all the best in his retirement.

Sincerely,

Maria Christenson Bernier '94



Prof. Starr was assigned to be my Advisor upon my arrival at Amherst in '83, as I had originally expressed interest in a math major during my interview and in my application. (Or perhaps, it was simple random luck that assigned him to me!). But my first interactions with him took place in my freshman calculus class the fall of 1983. Who could forget the ever present socks and sandals?? It seems so cliché but he really did make calculus fun --- while also making it seem so much less esoteric and intimidating than other teachers had managed to do from my high school days...

But alas, after multivariable with Velleman derailed my career in higher math, I moved on to Prof. Gewertz as my Advisor, having switched to Anthropology. It turns out that my Anthropology degree was a wonderful way to launch my career in international education and cultural exchange so I have no regrets there, but I always did feel that I somehow failed Prof. Starr. He asked me to come to his office after I told him I was abandoning a math major, and he really tried to convince me that I could do it, and that one tough class didn't necessarily have to be the 'full stop' on my pursuit of higher math.

Luckily, even though I didn't see much of Prof. Starr in class after that, he did hire me (as he had done with many students before me), to clean his house on a weekly basis so I could earn some much needed cash while at Amherst.

My respect for him only grew further when I met Mrs. Starr, who was as lovely and gentle as Prof. Starr was -- what a perfect match! I honestly can safely say that I have rarely met anyone as thoughtful, dedicated and equanimous as the Starrs.

Congratulations on an incredible career and for making such an impact on what I can only imagine to be hundreds and hundreds of Amherst students and graduates.

- Katherine (Oram) Bini '87

The sense of excitement Professor Starr brought to the task at hand was not limited to mathematics. I was in his calculus class spring semester 1983, when the detailed specifications for Seeley Mudd were being prepared. Norton was apparently on the committee. He was constantly quizzing us not just on Leibniz's ciphers, but also on our opinion of the most useful finishes and furnishings for the glorious new building that would replace the sparse rooms of Williston Hall. I am afraid I've forgotten almost everything about how to calculate the volume of a solid, but I still recall discussing whether there should be a shelf for books inside the toilet stalls or not. In all cases, the motivation was the same: from the great concepts down to the smallest detail of the learning environment, Norton Starr cared deeply about his students.

Andy Blauvelt '86



One of my favorite professors.

Todd D. Brandt '90



### SALUTE TO PROFESSOR NORTON STARR

Dear Norton,

I was an English major and did my thesis on E.B. White and his children's literature, yet one of my most lasting and cherished impressions from my time at Amherst is my friendship with you, a math professor...one that has grown over the years and continues to today.

I took Calculus my freshman year with you and enjoyed your teaching and sense of humor. However, it was outside the classroom that you first made a huge impression on me. I was walking down the stairs of Williston right after your class, thinking about my next class, when I heard your voice behind me. I turned and you were getting your bike. You asked me how

baseball was going. I was surprised and taken aback. You obviously knew me as a freshman in your calculus class, but I had no idea you knew about my other interests and activities - especially one like freshman baseball so far afield from the classroom. We then had a great discussion and I remember leaving afterwards with a tremendous sense of joy and comfort - the professors here not only knew us as students but also as human beings with a variety of interests and activities. I was first and foremost made to feel at home. I will never forget that first discussion we had. It defined the Amherst experience for me.

Some thirty-five plus years later, now with two of my own kids at Amherst, I was delighted to find out that you were still at the college - teaching and nurturing the students of the 21st century. I actually recall that you contacted me via email when you had seen my daughter's name in the directory and were wondering if I was related to her. Thus sprang up an opportunity to renew our friendship. Several visits and a lovely dinner with you and Irene later, we continue to keep in touch. You've helped me with a math project in South Africa and introduced me to a wonderful young artist with whom I've since had the pleasure to work with and witness her first children's book come to press. I've also learned of your many talents - in particular, your world-class reputation as a creator of wonderful puzzles - on the internet and also hand-crafted in wood. You still have your love of bike-riding, incredible affinity and ability for math - both to teach it and live it in your daily hobbies and activities, and endless interest in students...as you've been so cordial and kind to my Liz and Tim at Amherst.

You will be missed at Amherst. I hope you will be able to teach now and then, ride your bike through the campus, and continue to mentor the Amherst College community on how to be a quality educator, first-class human being, and person of world-class character. I trust our friendship will continue to unfold for the years to come. It has been a quiet treasure I so greatly value and appreciate. It has helped me be a better person and that is so much more than anything else I know.

I wish you all the best and thank you more than you'll ever know for that first friendly chat we had outside Williston Hall so many years ago....For it gave me comfort then and provides a unique comfort now - knowing that I have such a genuine and kind friend, with years of that friendship to still unfold.

May you receive as much goodness and kindness as you have shown to me and so many others over the years. With deep affection and friendship,

Bruce Butterfield '71

I'm responding to an email regarding Professor Starr. It's good to see familiar names from the Mathematics department still there. I'm currently living in Chicago, married, working as an Internal Medicine physician.

It may seem unusual, but one of my strongest memories of Professor Starr at Amherst took place close to the time of my graduation. We were having a casual discussion and he was going on and on about a book he had recently read, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. His enthusiasm was infectious, and soon thereafter I went out and bought the book. Well, I started it several times, but with me being busy and it being such a large book, I never got that far into it. That is, until this fall when I made a whole-hearted effort, and thoroughly enjoyed it. Much of it was read, oddly enough, while on vacation in Peru--Machu Picchu, Lake Titicaca, the rain forest. The book was complex, strange, funny, goofy, thought-provoking, and I could understand Professor Starr's appreciation for it. It took almost 19 years, but please thank him for the recommendation for me.

Sincerely,  
Eric Brehm '91



Norton: You have been my advisor, teacher, mentor and friend since September of 1971. We've been fortunate enough to stay in touch off and on for nearly forty years, and I continue to benefit from your generosity and clear thinking. When you learned that I was teaching statistics to business students, your enthusiasm and encouragement stimulated me just as they did when I struggled in our freshman calculus class.

I continue to apply so many lessons that you taught me about teaching and learning. Use vivid examples. Share your love of the subject. Write LOOK on the board, and then turn the Os into eyeballs. Be patient and generous with your time. Lend your books. Make bad jokes. Bring goodies to early-morning classes (I always tell my students that, had they been lucky enough to have Prof. Starr, they'd be enjoying donuts and cider rather than the junk I deliver). Most importantly: always remember that it's about the students.

Still, I haven't fully emulated what I learned at your side. I've never arranged Sunday morning office hours to assist a student, as you did for me. I don't brew coffee for the class. And I've never used black chalk.

I think of you often when preparing a lecture, writing recommendations, and counseling students. As you well know, when Minitab reports descriptive statistics it provides two measures related to the sample size:  $N$  and  $N^*$ , where  $N^*$  is the count of missing observations. Like missing data, you sometimes fly under the radar – but anyone foolish enough to overlook you risks making a huge mistake.

Thank you, Norton, for all that you've taught me.

Robert Carver '75

Thank you for inviting me to Norton Starr's Retirement Reception. Unfortunately, I cannot attend. However, I wanted to be among those who sent thanks and congratulations to Dr. Starr upon reaching this important milestone. I'm sure he is doing so with characteristic diffidence and humor!

As one who struggled with mathematics all through my education, it has always been a source of wonderment and inspiration to me that Dr. Starr even remembered my name in subsequent years, much less the many personal details that he seemed to retain with such grace and genuine interest. As is undoubtedly the case with others, not only did he remember me decades after my undistinguished performances in his classes, but he actually took the time and trouble to stay in touch through the years. Although I worried at times that he remembered me so well because I stood out as one of the worst students he ever had, I suspect that it was really much more a testament to his humanity and genuine commitment to his students, regardless of their aptitude. He was always encouraging to me, and as a result, I have had less of a phobia and much more of an inclination toward quantitative analysis in my career than I would otherwise have had. Over the years, I have come to look forward to seeing Norton on campus during reunions and other events, and he has come to represent something important to me about the best sort of people and the best sort of education in life. So, thank you ever so much, Norton, for befriending this poor student and for being such an outstanding person in your own right. I have learned much more than mathematics from you. Best wishes in the next stage of your good life well lived.

Warm regards,

Sam Caldwell '70



I will not be able to attend the reception, but I just wanted to take a few minutes to say how much of a pleasure it was to be one of Professor Starr's students. The sight of him turning away from the blackboard with chalk on his face brought much needed levity to the brutally early morning classes (by college standards), and watching him puzzle over a simple mistake made on the board brought a sense of humbleness to the classroom. I am honored to have been taught by him, and I wish him the best of luck after his leave from Amherst College.

-Michael Chen '08

I'm very sorry I won't be able to attend the reception.

In my first class at Amherst, and many times thereafter, he called me "señor". I'd like to say I got it on my own, but I think he finally had to point out to me that my username on the VAX was elcranor. Anyway, that's a perfect example of his clever and subtle sense of humor. Note as well that it was quite impressive for a professor to know a new freshman's account name back in 1989 when many people weren't even getting email yet.

I also loved his habit of offering a class the choice between an in-class or a take-home exam. I'm sure that many times students blithely voted for the take-home mistaking that for the easy road. Those take-homes were brutal! (and of course, very satisfying when you actually worked them out)

It was a privilege to study under him, I hope he finds great enjoyment in retirement, and of course I feel a little bad for the future students who will miss out.

Erich Cranor '93



For a black girl from Washington, DC away from home for the first time, I would not have enjoyed or even possibly finished my experience at Amherst had it not been for Professor Starr. As I reflect, Professor Starr was indeed a bright light for me starting from the beginning of my tenure at Amherst. Not only did he continue to stimulate my love for math, his inordinate ability to make a seemingly dry subject come to life actually made me consider majoring in math?!!@. And he will never know the confidence boost he gave me when he recruited me as his calculus TA.

I got a glimpse of the caring side of the man upon the advent of the earliest snow season I had ever encountered in my life (in October 1981, Amherst got over 8 inches). In a wonderful snow ball fight on the 'beach' of Valentine Hall, I sustained a broken ankle--more from the football-like tackle of a class mate than from the snow--so I was immobilized given the hills and ice and lack of maneuverability while wearing a cast. Dr. Starr was the only professor who made a trip to the dorm to see me not only to fill me in on missed classes, but also just to say hello. It is one of the memorable experiences of Amherst for me.

I congratulate him on his many years of service to the College and its students and wish him Godspeed in filling his hearts desires in retirement. Blessings.

Phyllis Cureton '85



Dear Norton: thanks for helping me realize I wasn't the only weird one at Amherst - john deek '97

A circle. Just when I thought that you did not know me, you make your presence know yet again. I received a letter dated January 27, 2009, titled "Dear Mathematics Graduate". I was confused, yes, a Psychology major at Amherst College, until I understood the message about your retirement and reflections. Given that I am at a Friends School, I will practice.

I remember the chalk on the face and trousers, the picture placed in front of the class during the final exam revealing a timeless educator, the envelop carrying a picture of penguins diving off an ice sheet after my years as a water polo variety, our chance meeting on The Hill where I let you know about my interest in Epidemiology and the subsequent box of resources on the subject. As I attempt to give back, you are not far from my thoughts. Thank you.

Thomas Donley '90





I took a calculus course from Professor Starr in 1990 and benefited from his patient and good-natured teaching like scores of other students. His course was only one of two math courses I took in college (as I sampled everything that an Amherst liberal arts education offered), but Professor Starr treated me as if I had been a prize math major. His way of keeping in touch with students and taking an interest in our lives deeply impressed me. Sometimes he would be the only Amherst professor to drop by our class reunions, and I was happy to see him most recently at my 15th reunion last year (and to introduce my fiancé (now wife) to him four days after our engagement). His dedication to teaching and his personal connection with his students is something precious, and the attitude of professors like him is the cornerstone of Amherst's unique culture.

I have fond memories of sitting in class watching him inadvertently spread chalk all over his face, while his Bart Simpson T-shirt showed through his white dress shirt. My father and sister still remember him, too, from sitting in on my class during a visit to the college.

I hope he keeps biking through campus during his retirement, and I would love to see him at my next reunion. The way time flies these days, it will be here very soon.

I'd like to say congratulations to Professor Starr for finding the right profession and having an impact on so many people during his career. I'm very grateful to have been one of his students.

All the best,  
John Ericson '93



Prof. Starr used to cut out Freshmen Facebook photos to map names to faces for first few days of class. On my first day of Discrete Math in 1999, as prof. Starr was going around the room reciting names, he came to my name, Baker Franke, and paused, staring at me. He rubbed some chalk on his face, furrowed his brow, and eventually pointed at me vigorously and said "your father is Jay Franke, class of '72!" He was right, of course, and he never even had my father as a student! \*\*

-Baker Franke '02

Dear N\*

One must respond on more than a single level.

First: Thanks for days and years of expert mathematics. Your presentations and examples always had “the ring of truth” about them. It made following them an intellectual and nearly moral imperative.

Going deeper, thanks for the humor and light-heartedness that made each class a bit warmer, more inviting, less susceptible to the onslaught of sleepy heads and cold feet. Some Amherst classes could be skipped but yours urged attendance.

Thanks for being so easily approachable. This took me a long time; Amherst professors are pretty daunting to a public-school boy from the South. Under your encouragement I made “friends” with other math professors. It’s one of the best memories of my college education. I could easily have missed it.

Thanks – in a related vein – for sharing the stories of your storied colleagues. In fact, one such story stands head and shoulders above the others and I hereby request confirmation of its details. It was a story you told about my advisor (Robert Breusch) – a story he would never have told about himself (and sadly we never got to a “story” basis in our relationship). The story (as I recall and hope to retell it) goes thus: One day one of you slid a number theory conundrum under Bob’s door: Prove: Given  $k$  digits in a specified sequence, there exists a prime number  $n$  such that  $n$  contains the  $k$  digits in the specified order. Some minutes (15-20) later, a proof slid under the door of the prof who initially slid the conundrum. Perhaps an hour later a proof of the following appeared under the door (from Bob of course): Given  $k$  digits in a specified sequence, there exists a number  $n$  such that  $n$  squared contains the  $k$  digits in the specified order. A few hours later (2 in the afternoon?), while the initiating prof was teaching, a paper slid under the classroom door with a proof: Given  $k$  digits in a specified sequence, there exists a number  $n$  such that  $n!$  contains the  $k$  digits in the specified order. And perhaps later (dimly recalled) a similar proof for 2 raised to the  $n$ th power.

True?

Thanks too for the invitation and visit to your home at my 5th reunion. And thanks for your continuing discussions about math problems, computer graphics (when still maddeningly difficult), teaching a Sabbatical year at Amherst (not looking likely given other attractions now), and more.

Enjoy a richly-deserved and fruitful retirement.

Warmly,

Tom Fuller ‘71

I won't be able to attend, but I wish Prof. Starr all the best for an enjoyable and productive retirement!

J. Carr Gamble, III '76



It's been a long time since I have been to Amherst -- I graduated in 1987, and I haven't really been back. I have had a very satisfying career post-Amherst: an MS in computer science and a PhD in philosophy, a career in computer science and research program management that has taken me around the world, and the opportunity to use funding decisions to support and guide the scientific careers of some very promising young grad students. Looking back, I can see that the education I had at Amherst was a critical part of the journey, and gave me the writing and analytic skills to be successful in what I do now.

One thing I have always remembered happened over 20 years ago, in 1983 in Prof. Starr's 9am class on combinatorics. I enjoyed the class, even though I wasn't particularly nimble at the subject matter. However, I was also a freshman at Amherst, and learning how to balance the academic demands with the (for me, very new!) world of social opportunities. I often erred on the side of too much partying. One day, this caught up to me, and I overslept on the mid-term exam that Prof. Starr was giving. I still remember getting a phone call in my dorm room from Prof. Starr around 9:20, asking me very politely whether I was planning to be in class for the exam, because he would like me to be there. I of course shot straight out of bed, pulled some clothes on, raced over to Williston Hall, and took the exam in a state of complete adrenaline overload. I think I got an extra 30 minutes to complete it.

The point of this story is that Prof. Starr was interested in me enough to track me down and called me, instead of just routinely marking my exam grade as zero. Little things can make a big impression, and I haven't forgotten what happened that morning. For me it gets to the essence of the big idea of Amherst: that education is a collaborative endeavor, rather than something simply dispensed from faculty. I try and remind myself of this story when the people who work for me screw up somehow or make silly mistakes -- that we must remember that we are all human, that we often need each other's help to be better, and that results often matter more than the precise timing or manner of their production.

I'm sure I profusely thanked Prof. Starr when I arrived all out of breath at Williston that morning. It is a pleasure to thank him again.

Regards,

Mark Greaves '87

I was Norton's student when he first came to Amherst in the late '60's.

Norton was the only prof. I knew who came to the dining hall on a regular basis to eat with students. He brought his wife and infant son with him. It was the beginning of what was to be a recurring theme of Norton's time at Amherst- a sincere effort to be involved with students and be available to students.

Some fun snippets:

I called Norton one time and asked him a question: he immediately said he would have to think and I waited (all the while sensing there was a high level of brain activity on the other end of the line). After a few minutes he gave me his complex answer.

Norton used to come to reunions and he would know people's names even after many years had gone by. We determined that he must have looked up our yearbook and memorized the names and faces.

Regards,

Justin ( time) Grimes '69



Professor Starr clearly cares deeply about his students - including those who weren't destined to be math majors...

He was my freshman advisor and my most vivid memory aside from the time he dedicated to make sure that my questions from class were fully answered was him seeing me up & about on the "vax" system (old email system) at about 2 in the morning during the week and telling me it was time to go to sleep! Certainly above and beyond the call of duty for an advisor and good advice.

Congratulations to him on his retirement,

Sara Gubins '96

Entering Amherst College in the fall of 1984, I had signed up for a calculus class with Norton Starr. When combined with nightly rehearsals for the fall play, I soon found that my year of high school calculus was not enough to help me through the rigors of homework required to keep up with the class. I was gobsmacked to get a phone call from none other than Professor Starr who had seen my test scores and was concerned about how I was doing. Ultimately I realized I was not up to the challenge and used my freshman drop to exit the class. It has been 25 years since then but I never forgot Professor's Starr reaching out to me with concern. I was touched with his thoughtful gesture and it has stayed with me all these years. So although I was only a blip on the horizon of Professor Starr's long career, this Fine Arts major was happy to have crossed paths with him.

Kandalyn Hahn '88



I was a chemistry major, not a math graduate, but Professor Starr was one of the most memorable teachers I had at Amherst because of the personal interest he took in me as his student.

I had Professor Starr for Calculus 2 during first semester my freshman year. Unfortunately, I didn't do very well in his class because I was spending much more time drinking beer than studying Taylor series. When it came time for the final exam, my partying ways caught up to me. I wrote a pathetic little note of apology to Professor Starr about how sorry I was that I did not know how to attempt the first problem on the exam, and I struggled my way through the rest of the test with little more success.

Later that evening, the phone in my dorm room rang. It was Professor Starr, who was grading the exam. He had called me to tell me he was sorry that he had put one of the more difficult problems on the exam first. I never had any other teacher take such a personal interest in my work and reach out to me in that way. I was very touched, although also extremely mortified that he thought my failure was his fault.

In class he was very clear and drew wonderful diagrams on the blackboard in colored chalk. This made him literally a colorful character, because when he was asked a question, he would rub his chin in a thoughtful way while he was contemplating his answer and all the colored chalk on his fingers would transfer to his face in interesting patterns. I loved him for that because he cared so much about the questions and the people asking them.

All my best wishes go to him for his well-earned retirement.

Sincerely,

Susan Haney '89

I arrived at Amherst in the Fall of 1979 at the age of 32 and had a husband and a small child. There were exactly two married women students with children in attendance at the time. I also lived about an hour commute from the campus.

I was one of the local community college graduates that were admitted to Amherst under a special transfer program. While I had a GPA of 4.0 at Greenfield Community College, I was totally unprepared to be an Amherst student. Needless to say, I struggled that first year and considered leaving many, many times. My situation was not helped when a professor told me that I should drop out and stay home with my son where a woman belonged.

Then I enrolled in Professor Starr's Statistics class. I will always remember that he wore socks and sandals no matter what the weather. The classrooms in Williston Hall had stages and I can still see him perched on the edge of that stage.

He was the best thing that happened to me!!! He encouraged me and gave me so much extra attention. I had his home telephone number and was asked to call anytime that I needed him. I remember one evening that he called me. He said that his wife told him a woman with a Southern accent had called, but didn't leave a message. He was concerned that it was me and I needed his assistance.

I have such fond memories of him and wish him all the best in his retirement.

Linda (Heinle) Haslett '82



Please pass on my very best to Professor Starr.

I have very fond memories of the calculus classes I took with him, and remember him as one of the best professors I had at Amherst -- for his expertise, engaging teaching style, always enjoyable offbeat humor and overall good nature!

All the best for a restful and fun retirement :)

Cliff Hinrichs '93

MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE PEOPLE – PROF. NORTON STARR

Dear Norton,

I would love to join in the celebration of your many years of teaching/service at Amherst – but I am in the Pacific Northwest and won't be able to make it.

When you wrote in response to the announcement about my Bosnia show at Amherst, I couldn't believe that you remembered me! After all, I had been a C student at best and that was 35 years or more ago. What a memory you have!

My memories of you from the distant past: You were passionate about teaching and about the subject matter, and you were funny, so important with a subject like math! You would get so involved in writing on the chalkboard that you would occasionally take the eraser, wipe off some of the board, then hold the eraser in your hand and occasionally put it up to your nose, which would then have a white spot by the end of class. I also remember that in winter, you wore a very warm hat that was not exactly the latest fashion statement – I believe it was black with fold-down fleece ear muffs and had a chin strap which remained untied.

It was very special when I returned to Amherst to give a slide talk in the fall of 2007 – and you were there. I will never forget the feeling of circles of life as I stood in a place where I had once sat as a student. Now I was now briefly teaching and several of my teachers – you included – were sitting before me. I appreciated your enthusiasm and warmth as we became re-acquainted.

You kindly sent me a poster from that event – and a recipe for turkey that I haven't yet used – maybe this November...

I'm sure you will be honored and toasted at your retirement celebration, and I send you best wishes across the miles. I'll be in Northampton briefly this summer, perhaps we can meet again!

All the best,

Steve Horn '71



My favorite memory of Norton:

Due to his many thoughtful pauses with hand in chin at the front of the class, Norton's face was always covered in chalk. We assumed he was oblivious to this fact and it took several weeks to grow accustomed to the sight and not silently chuckle in every class. At one class towards the end of the semester he pulled down a coordinate system screen over the blackboard, but rather than tapping the eraser over it to create a chalk dust coordinate system on the board he made as though to tap his own cheek to it, thereby acknowledging and making fun of his own chalkiness.

I remember him as an entertaining instructor, but also someone who I was willing to approach outside of class for help with some math in my Biology thesis. I wish him all the best in his retirement.

Allen Hurlbert '94



I unfortunately will not be able to make Norton's Retirement Reception as the date conflicts with the annual STOC conference that I must attend.

I was one of his first Amherst students, and he had a major part in getting me started on my career. When my application to the MIT math department for grad school only got me onto their waiting list, Norton, who had just received his PhD from MIT the previous year I believe, wrote them and got me an upgrade to full acceptance. MIT turned out to be the perfect place for me, and who knows where I would be today had I not gone there.

David Johnson '67



I am sorry that I can't attend. I am having a baby in June, and will be unable to travel in May.

Thank you very much for the invitation.

Stephanie Kimmel '90

My recollections of Norton Starr are some of my happiest memories. I mostly remember the chalk. Chalk on his pants, chalk on the board, chalk on his face. It would get every where and I remember us, students, all laughing about it and joking and sometimes the jokes weren't very funny.

I remember making up silly problems with my homework just so I could talk to him and hang out in his office and pretend to be doing something purposeful.

Mostly, I just wanted to understand what he saw in mathematics. Why was he so passionate that he'd be covered in chalk dust and not even notice the students snickering? How did he get through each day, and then one day I got it: he loved teaching us. I was so privileged to have him as professor.

Sometimes, I wondered was he like this outside of the classroom? Is he always this calm? Always this thoughtful? Always this considerate? How does he live like this?

I got my answer many years later, a full decade later.

I realized that when I'm terribly tired and demoralized and utterly discouraged with life, I see Norton Starr standing at a blackboard with chalk on his hands and doing calculus problems.

I realize that when James Denton retired, I didn't write anything. He was my professor for three semester. I think he's one of the most amazing people I've ever met.

I thought I was having a difficult time. I thought, my life is so hard, I can't bother to write even an email to acknowledge the person that taught me the most important lesson in statistics, compassion.

Now, my life is much worse, and I think, hmm, if I can't find the time to write this email, when will I.

I cling to my memories of Amherst because sometimes, in a very dark world, that's the only light I can see. Each and everyone of my professors, and what I always see reflected, is tolerance, compassion - love.

It's not the great lesson I thought I'd get when I went to Amherst. I thought I'd learn how to genetically engineer stuff. I left thinking, how can I love?

I don't think there's ever an easy answer to that, but what I see in the life of someone like Norton is that it's the patience, the tolerance, the compassion, the quiet.

And of course, the chalk on the hands.

Daniel Kekaiola Kauwe '99

I'm not sure why I'm on your list, since I was not a math major in college, and the only math course that I took from Professor Starr was calculus. But that said, I do remember well that calculus class -- probably better than I remember the material itself (which I must not have known that well to start with since I got by far the worst grade of my Amherst career in the class)!

In any case, though I am sure others have much better stories to tell, I can add two small details to your book of memories:

Back when the internet was still to come, and "Facebook" meant a printed book, with pictures of freshmen in it, I remember Professor Starr coming to class on the first day with our facebook pictures glued to index cards so that he could match names to faces. As a young and starry eyed first year student, this really showed me something about the Amherst faculty, and how much they cared about teaching and about their students.

But, I have to confess, when I think of Norton Starr, what I most think of is: Chalk Dust. That man could accumulate more chalk dust on his clothing and body during a class meeting than anyone I have ever seen. Now, as a professor myself, I thankfully use white boards more than chalk boards, but whenever I am forced to use chalk, I remember Norton Starr fondly and I hope that I will emerge from my class meeting less covered in chalk than he typically was.

My best wishes and congratulations to Professor Starr on his retirement. It is, indeed, hard to imagine Amherst without him.

best wishes,

Amy Kind '90



Sorry I can't attend his retirement function.

Just wanted to say that Norton was the very best teacher I had in any academic setting. I just loved his approach, humor and dedication.

My best to him in retirement and my heartfelt thanks.

Lee A. Klombers, M.D. '81

Dear Professor Starr,

Thank you for your kindness, wisdom, humor and warmth! You are truly an amazing professor who touched my life. In addition to sparking my interest in math and encouraging my intellectual curiosity, you created a caring environment for me to learn and grow. Spring semester of my freshman year was a difficult time for me personally, as I had found out that my mother was ill. I traveled frequently between Amherst and home (New York City)... and you generously offered articles to read on the bus, chocolates to nibble on, and your time to tutor me when I missed class! I also fondly remember going to your house... where you and Irene treated me to delicious home-cooked meals. I feel lucky that you were in my life. A guardian angel during formative years.

Sorry I have been so out of touch. I am happily living in New York, and I work at a hospital system in the city... in administration. I love my job and enjoy the city tremendously. Even though I cannot be at Amherst at the end of the month, I will be there in spirit and raising my virtual champagne glass to celebrate the gifted and amazing individual that you are. Congratulations on your retirement and thank you again!

Warmly,

Helen Kotchoubey '95



I enjoyed Professor Starr's Math 11 course as a freshman at Amherst, in 1999. To encourage us to pay attention, Professor Starr gave out a piece of chocolate if we caught him making a mistake. One day I happened to spot one, and as luck had it he was out of candy. The next day, in my AC box, was a piece of chocolate from Professor Starr. That someone so bright could take the time to do something so small and thoughtful-- well, that's when I knew I had come to the right school. Although I went on to other subjects, I never forgot that chocolate. Thanks.

Jordan Lang '03

We always referred to him as ‘Norton’ amongst ourselves. All other professors we referred to by their last name, but not him. I never thought much of it at the time. It certainly wasn’t out of lack of respect for him, or his authority. But it just seemed natural, affectionate.

Thinking back over 20 years now, I strain to put my finger on just what made us feel affectionate about him. I want to think of a story, a long story that exemplifies how special Professor Starr, Norton, made us feel. But there’s no distinct memory of it. Perhaps my memory has been dulled by too many years and almost a decade of mommy-brain.

But sitting at a stoplight today it occurred to me that it was possible that I couldn’t access any extended memories because I didn’t have any. In conversation, Norton was always brief, almost terse, but never short or curt. He didn’t fill the air with unnecessary words, although what he did say he said with meaning and feeling. He always left plenty of room for me to talk. It could have been unnerving, but somehow it wasn’t. Perhaps it was always the hint of a smile, or the intensity of his eyes when I spoke to him. Perhaps my interactions were also that way, brief, but meaningful. Leaving me with vignettes, snatches, allusions.

I certainly remember the socks, the sandals, and the bicycle. I remember a final exam where the message ‘Happy Holidays’ was the answer to a question if you did the matrix multiplication correctly. I remember how pleased he was to discover that two of his students were dating. I remember how distressed he was when a student was in trouble. I remember sharing a dinner at his home with his family and some other students. I remember the one-line emails that were signed ‘N\*’. But mostly, I remember how, despite the fact that I never really quite got my mind around the math, conversations were always affirming.

I always think of Norton N\* with fondness, affection, and perhaps with my own hint of a smile.

Deborah Lee Leonard ‘89

## A Tale of Two Pi(e)s

Pie #1: An actual pie. For eating.

My roommate and I, dubious candidates for math majors at best, were nonetheless treated to a lovely evening at the home of Professor Starr, where he and Professor Armacost served us a pie made by hand, crust and all. My roommate remembers being delighted to meet in Professor Starr the first person at Amherst who had read her favorite author, Edward Abbey. I remember the pie. It didn't make me a better math student, but it made me want to try.

Pi #2: That other one. The math kind.

There was a mathematical relationship I have struggled to remember for years: it involved polar coordinates and integrating some form of the natural log constant  $e$  over infinity, and the answer, magically, impossibly, was  $\pi$ . Or maybe you started with  $\pi$  and ended with  $e$ . (I said I was a dubious candidate for a math major.) Either way, these two seemingly unrelated constants were intertwined in a beautifully elegant way, and the universe suddenly seemed a comforting, ordered place, and sitting there in class in Seeley Mudd, I kind of saw god for a minute.

I have tried to reproduce this moment for students in my literature classes, but somehow, telling them, "There's this constant called  $e$ , and if you integrate it over something and use polar coordinates you get  $\pi$ , which isn't supposed to have anything to do with it, and doesn't that freak you out?" doesn't have the same effect. I would be very much obliged if some successful mathematical person listening to this would take the time to send me the equation someday.

The math department at Amherst was perhaps the kindest, most down-to-earth and welcoming collection of scholars I have encountered in academia. I am grateful to Professor Starr and his colleagues for a mathematical universe I don't visit every day but that I have always carried around with me. And also for terms like "isomorphisms" and "countable infinities," which, in the right circles, can be used to make some half-baked opinion of mine sound very authoritative.

With gratitude and best wishes,

Margit Longbrake '90

and (in truth, never dubious) Sara Kenamore '90

I only took one class with Norton, but it's one of my fondest Amherst memories. I wish I had more precise details to share but time has faded some of them. I do remember being introduced to ultra dark chocolate by dint of answering some question that he put to the class and getting a small piece as a reward. The clearest impression I retain is of Norton's obvious dedication and commitment to material as unexciting as entry-level math. I got the sense that he cared about our learning this material as if it were the only material that mattered in the whole world.

Nick Lesiecki '00

P.S. I still follow Norton's plan, and I always get something out of it!



I will never forget the final exam question in complex numbers that none of us were able to solve. Turned out Norton couldn't solve it either. He dryly noted that from then on he made sure to solve all exam problems before putting them on the exam. I think that the exam would have been in the 75/756 academic year.

Alec McAndrew '76



Norton,

Thank you for all the good things that you did for me: for taking me on as a thesis student late in the game, for having me over at your house for Thanksgiving dinner one semester when I couldn't go home, for giving my teaching career a start by letting Stu Goff know that I was looking for a job, for just being you, and, most of all, for putting up with me!

If you and Irene ever find yourselves in the Arizona area, please stop by. You are always welcome at my place.

Thanks again and enjoy your retirement.

-Joe Melita '85

I am so glad I had Norton Starr as a professor! He showed me what it means to be a teacher by demonstrating how to really care about students in their learning process regardless of their ability with the subject matter.

I was not a good math student. That is an understatement. But, Norton never indicated any impatience with me or lack of interest in me as I struggled to comprehend his course. In fact, Norton went out of his way to encourage me to keep at it. I remember with great gratitude the times Norton carved out his evenings to tutor me.

Now, almost forty years later, I don't think I actually remember any of the math from Norton's class. But, I clearly remember Norton and the important lessons he shared about embracing intellectual curiosity, showing consideration, offering encouragement, making the extra effort, and respecting Amherst's liberal arts education as inclusive not exclusive.

I wish Norton a wonderful retirement along with a big "thank you"! And, I hope that he will remain actively engaged in numerous challenging activities.

Best wishes,

Warren Mersereau '70





Greetings,

It is a great pleasure to write this letter on the occasion of Norton's retirement from the Math Department at Amherst College. Norton became my advisor when I declared a math major way back in 1973. He has been a trusted advisor and friend to the present day. That is devoted service that goes well beyond the duty of a college professor – even at a school as prestigious as Amherst. I'm sure Norton does not consider that he has been a life-long advisor to me but that is the nature of all great mentors. They provide excellent guidance and serve as professional models with nary a thought to the wisdom they impart to those around them.

I can provide three examples of excellent advice and/or support that Norton gave me. The first occurred during the spring semester of my sophomore year when I rashly decided to enroll in three math courses the following term – two of which were among the most difficult courses taught in the department. In a rather mild (and perhaps dubious) tone, Norton conjectured that perhaps this would not be the wisest set of courses in which to enroll. Alas, this was one of the rare occasions on which I did not heed his advice and I suffered mightily that following semester, passing the two difficult courses by the skin of my teeth. Despite my misery, Norton was always upbeat and invariably had a wry crack to help raise my spirits.

After Amherst, I bumped from job to job and finally landed in a graduate program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Norton provided his second service to me – now six or so years after graduation – by graciously offering to write me a letter of recommendation when I applied to Ph.D. programs in economics. In one of those odd coincidences (that perhaps could be assigned to the next generation of students in Probability and Statistics), I ended up living as a graduate student at Harvard in a carriage house in Watertown Ma behind the house where Norton had lived years before while a graduate student at MIT. Small world.

A number of years later I was teaching at Princeton and working on a difficult problem involving random tax policy and its impact on investment. My co-author and I had a revise and resubmit at a top journal and were pretty much assured of the paper's publication if we could solve this difficult system of partial differential equations. I had tried every technique I could think of, had scoured every comprehensible textbook in the library and had consulted with a Princeton engineering professor who was a world-renowned expert on solving differential equations all to no avail. We simply could not solve this system of equations.

On an impulse I emailed Norton and explained the problem to him. He immediately emailed me back and said that if a power series solution didn't work then he couldn't think of a method that could possibly solve this system. "Power series?" I thought. I had tried every technique in the book save that one. Twenty-four hours later the system was solved and soon the article was on its way back to the journal where it subsequently appeared. It has become one of my more highly cited papers.

It has been a great pleasure over the years to keep in touch with Norton and observe his evolving interests and tastes. The Amherst math building is a lovely addition to the campus – in no small part because of his assiduous attention to detail during its construction. Generations of students at Amherst College have benefited from his teaching and mentoring and I count myself among the fortunate to have stumbled upon him. I wish him all the best in his retirement though I am quite confident that Norton will never be the retiring type even once he lays the chalk down and moves on to new activities.

Best regards,

Gib

Gilbert E. Metcalf '75

I certainly welcome the opportunity to participate in Prof. Starr's celebration of his wonderful career at Amherst. I am a 1986 mathematics graduate from Amherst and Prof. Starr was my advisor. As a current teacher (I train and supervise cardiothoracic surgery residents and graduate students in the Applied Mathematics Program at the University of Arizona), I have thought on occasion that a career in teaching is the ultimate profession of delayed gratitude. One puts blood, toil and tears into teaching students, sends them into the world and often does not find out how one's efforts are rewarded. I thought I would rectify this deficit--at least in my case.

Currently I am Associate Professor of Cardiothoracic Surgery at the University of Arizona and am active in performing cardiac surgery and teaching residents. Additionally, I am performing research with the Applied Mathematics Program constructing a mathematical model of the heart--a dynamic model that involves solution of differential algebraic equations. Prof. Starr is responsible for my current position and interests in ways that, I am sure, his modesty would not allow him to acknowledge.

First, he wrote a wonderful letter in support of my admission to medical school. In fact, the letter was so memorable that one of the gentlemen who interviewed me at Harvard Medical School wrote a letter to me after I was admitted. In his letter he mentioned that Prof. Starr's letter, where he said something along the lines that "were he to go under the knife, he hoped someone like (me) was at the other end" was a key factor in my admission. I have often suspected that it was Prof. Starr's wonderful humanity, kindness and intellectual honesty that was apparent in that letter, and that I was the fortunate beneficiary of those qualities by association. That letter was very meaningful to my grandmother (my grandfather was a GP in a small Wisconsin town and my grandmother his nurse) in her pride that a grandson was following in a grandfather's footsteps.

Second, his influence on my career in mathematics was also profound. Since my days as a resident, I have been involved in applying mathematical techniques to the study of heart function and heart disease. A love of mathematics was, of course, present before I came to Amherst, but any small talent I had was nurtured in so many important ways by Prof. Starr as my advisor and teacher. To this day, I warmly remember the (one) time in my mathematics career at Amherst when I solved a problem on an Advanced Calculus exam in a unique way and was lavishly praised by Prof. Starr. I suspect for me that his type of positive reinforcement provided more impetus to my subsequent career in mathematics than either he or I knew. I remember a time in the Advanced Calculus class when we all bombed one of his tests and he was just "dumbfounded" because it didn't seem all that hard to him (it was all Greek to us!). Of course, he rectified it--another test that was suitable for us and all was well.

Third, the intellectual rigor he instilled in his students is with me today. I am working with graduate students in the Applied Mathematics Program and I am constantly reminded of Prof. Starr's attention to mathematical rigor as I attempt to be an appropriate model to the students. I hope I can pass on just a little of the philosophy of solving mathematics problems I learned from Prof. Starr.

Prof. Starr, I hope you have a wonderful, joy-filled and fruitful "retirement." And I hope you understand how profound your influence was on my career and life and correspondingly I am sure you will hear the same from countless other former students. May you have a deep satisfaction that your devotion to teaching paid immeasurable dividends (much better than the stock market) in students like me and in the next generations of students.

With the most sincere gratitude and respect,

Michael J. Moulton '86



Prof. Starr, you may just remember that you were my instructor in multivariable calculus and advanced calculus during the 1968-69 academic year. You were a superb teacher, but what I remember most fondly was your kindness. As an undergraduate, I enjoyed math, but advanced calculus was a trial--I don't imagine three-dimensions very well (and was happier the next year in abstract algebra dealing with  $n$ -space that no one expected me to see in my head!). In the middle of that trying semester, my father died. Amherst, as institution and in the persons of my instructors, was wonderfully supportive, but no one was so understanding as you. You gently helped me through the course--giving me a grade I almost certainly did not deserve--and taught me that the most important lesson a teacher can give a student is one in compassion. I shall be always grateful.

Some years later, when I repeated what was already old news in my life by coming out to my Amherst friends in our 25th reunion book, you wrote me a wonderful note of support. For that, too, I thank you.

I hope your retirement is every joy you deserve.

Best,

Ed Phillips '71

Unfortunately, I won't be able to make this event. But I do want to communicate my congratulations and gratitude to Prof. Starr. I have wonderful memories of him as a inspiring and gifted (and chalk-covered) teacher and as a warm presence while I was at Amherst. I also recall amazing apple pie and an impressive demonstration of apple-peeling technologies. My most recent anecdote concerns a lecture I gave at Amherst a few years back at the invitation of the Russian Department (this is my field). I was startled to see Norton Starr there in the audience--the fact that he remembered me and made time in his schedule to come to my lecture made a deep impression on me. I'm sure that this is only small item in a long list of testaments to his dedication to his students.

Best wishes,

Kevin Platt '89



I recall that in 1989, he told us about a college (?) teacher he had that picked his nose. His nickname was Picknose.

I took Complex Analysis in the spring of 1989 with about 4 other students. I had the hardest time of any of the students – it was real mathematician's math. I am just a lowly physicist.

Matthew Poage was also in the class. He was a math major. I liked Starr, he was friendly and really nerdy. Everyone got 40% on his tests, except me, who got 30%, which was a B somehow.

I came up with one good idea that semester, which was that you can think of the complex plane (or the function  $e$  to the  $i$  theta) as corrugated cardboard, because if you slice along the real axis you get sine waves (like corrugations) and if you slice the other way (imaginary axis), you don't get the sine waves (you get exponentials). I may have the axes reversed. Other slices that are along a vector that is solely along one axis or another would yield sine waves with longer periods. He will probably remember the analogy, since he was like Prof. Armacost – a very good memory.

I still have the textbook by Levenson and Redheffer on my bookshelf. That was the last math class I ever took, or will ever take, I am sure. I wish I had taken groups rings and fields just to have been exposed to the ideas. I suppose I could buy a book on it and self-teach. Chances of that happening are remote!

It would be cool to come and see Norton Starr again, but I live in CA. My best to him! I will look him up when I come to Amherst next.

Austin Richards '89

I would love to be there for the reception, but I guess in the end it is a bit more than I can manage (I live in California now). So here's my story for the collection ...

I teach math now at a two-year college in Sacramento. Most of our classrooms have white boards instead of chalk boards. I regard the white boards as something that must have been invented by Satan, or else maybe someone from Williams -- they're awful. Not least of all, the ink gets all over everything, starting with my hands, and then my clothes, and then my books, and then my students' papers, and so on. From time to time, of course, I scratch my nose or something and get a great big smudge on my face. There are usually a few students who helpfully point it out so I can wipe it off. I like to keep things moving, though, and also to keep them thinking that the show is worth watching, so I usually say, "yeah, that's okay," and keep going with the smudge in place. Sometimes they think this is funny.

And sometimes they think that it's just strange, and look at me with concerned faces. And when that happens I stop and tell them about this one professor I had in college. On a fairly regular basis, he would erase the chalk board and then pause to gather his thoughts. As people sometimes do, he might rub his chin or tap his head while he was thinking. But he would do it **with the eraser still in his hand**. It wasn't uncommon for him to finish an hour-long class looking like a drunken baker. "That guy," I would think, 'is a nut-job.'

With the wisdom that time and experience has brought me, I now choose to believe that these antics were done deliberately, and with much forethought, so that the students would enjoy the show. On the occasion of your retirement, then, Professor Starr -- Well done! Besides your talents at math, you are a showman of great instinct and technical skill. I will try my best to carry on the craft that you helped me to learn.

Very Best Wishes,

Ted Ridgway '91

PS -- Or, I guess, in case you don't know what I'm talking about ... dude, you're a nut-job.

I wanted to extend best wishes to Professor Starr (and Mrs. Starr) on his retirement. I probably cannot make it to the reception but wish I could. I especially remember Professor Starr's kindness and friendliness in my sophomore year when he invited my girlfriend (at the time) and me to his house for dessert. We had a nice time with Professor and Mrs. Starr for a few hours and I remember thinking that that's what I had wanted by choosing a small college.

Thank you and regards,

Dani Ruran '89



I'd like to make it up to Amherst for Professor Starr's retirement celebration; however, it's possible that I won't be able to, so I thought I'd send up some stories for your volume just in case.

1) I'm sure that a number of people have commented on this, but the chalk on Professor Starr's face in every class was quite memorable.

Sometimes, it came from having his face a little too close to the board, others from having forgotten to put down the chalk before placing his hand on his chin while pondering a student's question.

2) Professor Starr never ceased to go out of his way to help a student. I was always surprised at his nearly immediate responses to e-mails, even those sent in the wee hours of the morning as I sat struggling with my multi-variable calculus problem sets.

3) Along the same lines, I took multi-variable during the fall of my sophomore year, when I was also taking Arabic. My Arabic class required me to remain at Amherst for a majority of Thanksgiving break, because class continued that week at UMass. Professor Starr had seen an article in *The Student* about students stranded over Thanksgiving break and offered in class to feed breakfast to any student who had to remain on campus during break. I took him up on the offer, and he and his wife could not have been more gracious and hospitable. It was also the only time that I have ever eaten blueberry pie for breakfast.

I'd just say finally that my math teacher in high school was a student of Professor Starr's when he was at Amherst, and I heard occasional stories about him here and there. Taking a class with him was one of the most rewarding academic experiences that I had at Amherst. His genuine desire to have his students actually learn the material that he taught was admirable and refreshing, and the way in which he compelled his students to approach analytically a problem paid dividends not only in his class but beyond as well.

Hopefully I can make it up to Amherst at the end of May, but my sister is graduating from Wake Forest this year, and I'm not quite sure when that happens.

-Steve Shashay '08

Some reminiscences of, and best wishes to, Prof. Norton Starr

In the summer after my junior year, I shared with a fellow student a sublet of a faculty house just below the college on the hill. Norton and Irene, and their two small boys, Ethan and Andrew, were the most helpful and friendly next-door neighbors we could ask for. It was especially a pleasure to get to know Norton better, and to be delighted repeatedly by his understated intelligence, charm, and dead-pan wit, which I had already learned to appreciate as his student in Advanced Calculus.

One of the things I remember from that summer was that I was enjoying having a kitchen and doing more cooking than I had theretofore done, and I mentioned to Norton that I was interested in cooking duck with orange sauce. He was immediately taken with the idea, and suggested I do it at their place. I don't remember very clearly the dinner itself, but it must have been anticlimactic after the fun we had making the plans and contemplating how delicious it would be.

Sometime that summer, I told Prof. Starr that I wanted to take his Complex Variables class. He expressed some misgivings, because I had not done well in Advanced Calculus, but ultimately he agreed to let me take the class. Something about what he said, or how he said it, helped motivate me to do a better job keeping up with the class (which turned out to be very good preparation for my coursework a few years later in the complex world of systems and controls in electrical engineering). My success in the class was a great boost to my self-confidence. On the final exam, I solved one problem in a way that was particularly elegant, Prof. Starr told me. He made me feel very proud of this mathematical accomplishment, and he has continued to do so -- even just a few months ago he sent me a copy of the notes from his latest set for the class, in which he included, with attribution, my solution to that problem.

I want to say something about Prof. Starr's notes. The notes he handed out, as well as the derivations he wrote on the board in class, which were not exactly the same, and which I copied meticulously into my notebook, were not only clear and elegant mathematically, but -- something that I also admired and tried to emulate -- they were also neatly structured syntactically. Although I don't recall Prof. Starr explicitly saying it, and I don't believe I articulated it to myself either, I think I learned the lesson that correctness of syntax facilitates clarity of thought, as well as communication.



I remember Professor Starr's wooden bowtie. I remember that he was pretty proud of how hard Calc III was (I think that is what the class was called, I might be confusing it with one of our classes.) In my academic life, I have always asked the math faculty at the schools I have taught if they know of Norton Starr, and they all have met him or heard of him at some time, and all speak highly of him. It was an honor to have learned from him, and I wish him well in retirement!

Peter Sheldon '89



Since graduating in 1975, I so far have stopped by only once, that I can recall, to visit Norton and Irene in Amherst. However, Norton has been a most faithful correspondent, tracking me down wherever I have lived, and keeping track of my career changes. One incisive comment he wrote me on a card stuck in my mind as particularly hitting the mark: "AI [artificial intelligence] -- last haven for a dreamer." Norton can be practically mischievous in making you ponder his words. When I graduated, he gave me a book, in which he inscribed, "Some day I will tell you about lancing a mental boil." This statement intrigued me a lot (Who knew at the time that it might describe what I try to do currently as a psychiatrist?), and some years later I asked him to tell me the story. There wasn't any, he said. It was just a nice image. I liked it too.

One of Norton's first mailings to me was remarkable for the number of colorful small-denomination stamps used for the postage. I figured out that Norton must save old stamps for this purpose. Numerous times since then, I copied this technique to add to the color and appeal of a letter or card.

Norton: Your very grateful student and friend sends you congratulations -- and best wishes for an interesting and enjoyable retirement!

David Sirkin '75

As an economics major who took one math class (albeit with Professor Starr), I'm wondering how I got on this distribution list. That being said, Math 12 with Prof Starr during my senior year was one of my favorite educational experiences at Amherst. I will make every effort to attend the reception.

My reflection is of a brilliant man, exceedingly funny and covered in chalk dust, running around the front of the room. That will always stick with me.

Doug Smink '93



I remember sitting in on one of Professor Starr's classes when I was visiting the campus as a high school senior. I was nervous about slipping in after the class had started, but was quickly engaged in the class, and it helped me make the decision to attend Amherst in the fall. Not only did I take a class with Professor Starr my freshman year, I had the opportunity to help him grade homework papers for another class. It was my first work-study job, and gave me the flexibility to earn some money without a fixed schedule of hours.

Pursuing my major took me away from math, but I have always had fond memories of Professor Starr's offbeat, mild-mannered delivery and always engaging teaching style. I congratulate him on this momentous occasion, as it is well deserved. I'm only sorry that future students won't be able to experience one of his classes. I wish him and Irene all the best in enjoying their future time together.

Congratulations and many thanks for your dedication,

Donna Soohoo '86

I would love to attend Prof Starr's Retirement Reception, but my wife is due to give birth to our first child on May 25<sup>th</sup> here in Hong Kong!

I took Multivariable Calculus with Prof Starr during my first semester at Amherst in my Freshman year. If I recall correctly, it was a 9am class that met 5 days a week, which, of course, is not a popular time schedule for college students. Every morning, I would make my way from my South College dormitory to Valentine for breakfast and then circle back to the Seeley-Mudd Building in time for the 9am class, where Prof Starr would greet us in his suit pants and Texas with dark socks! He was a great professor and an inspiration to all his students. I have kept in touch with only a few of my Amherst professors in the ten years since graduating, and Prof Starr is one of them. I wish him the very best in his retirement, and if he ever makes it to Hong Kong, please let me know. Cheers!

Best regards,

Bryan T. Southergill '98



I took one math course at Amherst during the fall of my first year (1986. Math 12). It was taught by Norton Starr. I have one vivid memory of the class that exemplifies Dr. Starr's sense of humor. Our final exam was unproctored -- we were given the exam and the ubiquitous blue book and left alone in the classroom to work. It was quiet, and I tend to focus to the point where the rest of the world falls away, but after a while I looked up to check on the time. A framed, poster-sized photo of a younger Norton Starr was propped up on the desk in the front of the room, keeping an eye on us. I nearly burst out laughing and smiled my way through the rest of the exam period.

Cynthia Suchman '90

I took real analysis from him in 1983.

He returned a homework assignment on epsilon-delta exercises/proofs. These types of assignments were typically not the most fun and exciting to do or to grade. However, it was clear from my reading his comments throughout the assignment that he had read with care and provided plenty of feedback. The first comment he wrote was "You do some good math". I was very encouraged getting that positive feedback. As my 9th grade son struggles his way through geometry, he gets so little feedback/correction/encouragement from his teacher. I can only hope that in his academic career, he'll encounter a teacher like Professor Starr who will teach, help and encourage.

Ted Sung '86



I send this in the thought that if I don't do it now, I might not get to it in a timely manner – so apologies for its brevity.

I was a first year student in the fall of 1990, and I took Multivariable Calculus with Professor Starr. I took it with Steve Long, who lived down the hall, and we struggled with it together, two guys who thought they were good at math, encountering college level math. In fact, that was the last math course I took, before taking some linear algebra courses after graduating thinking that I might pursue an economics PhD. I wish I could remember the exact words, but I have three strong memories of Professor Starr:

(1) First days in , I'm trying to find my footing in a new college world. I came from a big public high school in Berkeley, California, and while I have plenty of east coast roots, some of the east coast mannerisms and dress were new to me. For instance, the rage in my high school were various sneakers (named after the stars who promoted them, Andre Aggasi, Bo Jackson, Jordan, etc). I had a bright pair of Agassi tennis shoes, in start contrast to the prep school boys who all had the llbean mocs that seem to be a staple in the northeast. I think by class two I walked into the classroom, in front of Starr, turned to find my seat, and sat down. Starr followed my footsteps as I walked that path, and looked up when I sat down. "Ah, tennis shoes, you

must be Mr. Swift!”. By class two (or something like that) the teacher had my name and my face – using whatever device he could use (shoes, in my case). This was my first moment of the intimate Amherst environment and the efforts that faculty made to get to know who their students were, by name. Endearing him to me right away.

(2) I snuck out of his class with a B, I think (B+?). I wish I had the words, but it was something like “good job, considering what you were up against”, or something to that effect. I didn’t expect to get all As in college, but he made an effort – to me and my classmate Steve Long – to let us know that our grade was in fact a strong showing.

(3) Just yesterday (really!) I recounted “this college professor I had” who would strum chalk all over his face – robin’s egg blue is the color I remember most vividly – and name the chalk color as he used it, and proceed to get his face covered as class progressed, to say nothing of his back, every time he leaned against the board. Hysterical in a certain small-college-absent-faculty kind of way.

I don’t know that I’ll make the retirement party – I wasn’t much in the math department - but Professor Starr indeed left his mark on me, over 18 years later I still think of him saying “robin’s egg blue” when I see that shade. I wish him the best – and I hope that Amherst is cultivating similar educators and personalities so that future Jeffs can enjoy the wonder of special small college faculty that I did, thanks to him.

Best,

Geoff Swift ‘94



Thanks very much for this invitation. Unfortunately, I’m scheduled to have some surgery earlier that week and will be unable to attend.

Best wishes to Prof. Starr,

Bob Taggart ‘68

Stories about Norton Starr from Rachel Sunley Tyson:

Let's start with a recent story. I was interviewing for a job at the University of Illinois Laboratory High School in Spring 2006. During lunch I was asked to introduce myself and answer questions from students and teachers. Jim Carruba, the physics teacher, lead off with, "So you went to Amherst. Did you have any classes with Norton Starr, and does he really sign things N\*?" I assured him that Norton Starr did sign things that way and that I had many fond memories of him.

I then shared this story about Norton with the lunch audience. I took Math 22 (Advanced Calculus) with Norton Starr in the spring of my freshman year. Looking back there were many ways in which I was not ready for this class. Most notably, I didn't know any logical notation nor did I really understand how a proof was constructed; Dr. Velleman made all such things crystal clear to me the following year. I remember Norton being appalled that I didn't know the binomial theorem off the top of my head, and I re-

member being astounded that he could quickly graph  $\frac{1}{1+x^2}$  and then justify his graph to me with calculus. Anyway, one weekend I was yet again

struggling badly with the homework (I never did fully master  $\epsilon - \delta$  proofs that semester; that only came when I started tutoring calculus the next fall). I literally had had it up to here with the assignment. It was Sunday at around 4. I called Dr. Starr (I forget whether it was at home or his office) and left a somewhat incoherent message about how I was so frustrated, had to take a break, was going to go to the ARK (a Christian group on UMASS's campus), should get home around 8 and would Dr. Starr be around to talk after that? After all Norton was famous for being in his office at all sorts of strange hours and you could see his light shining out over the quad. When I got back to the dorm, there was a message on my machine which said that he would be at home, but to go ahead and call because he had just put the bread to rise so would probably be up until 2 a.m. baking bread. I called him. I don't even recall if I finished the assignment or not, what I remember is quintessential Norton making himself available to help his students all the time. I can not even count the number of times I walked up the steps of the math department at 10 at night looking for help since his light was on. I never remember being made to feel unwelcome.

Here's a funny story. Once, Norton posted a sequence. I forget whether it was on the board or through email or what. It was a "challenge problem." The sequence was (and while it clearly marks me as a geek, I can get the beginning of this sequence right every time which means it left a fairly indelible mark) 1, 4, 3, 11, 15, 13, ... There was one other freshman in Math 22 that spring, Michael Bogomolny. We spent HOURS trying to figure out what the rule for this sequence was. At some point we got Dr. Starr to give us the next couple of numbers in the list, but all it did was

disprove whatever rule we thought we had found. One week we went to hear the MAA lecture. It also left me a little fogged (hmm... this letter makes it look like I never got anything, but I assure you I did). During the lecture the speaker mentioned something about a book with just lists of sequences. I said something in my next communication with Norton about his challenge sequence that maybe I should just go find this book and look the sequence up. The next email I got from him had a signature line with the sequence and something like "A sunny has a clue." I asked if I was Sunny and if so if the book the speaker mentioned was the clue. Dr. Starr of course would not elaborate. I spent an afternoon up in the math library. I searched under keyword for sequences. There were hundreds of titles needless to say, but I just kept reading through all of the entries until I found the Handbook of Elementary Sequences. There was Dr. Starr's sequence of the smallest number with that number of letters in its English spelling. I took it downstairs to show Dr. Starr. He asked how I had found it. I told him about my catalog search. This time I searched on his computer with the keyword of sequence. That produced even more entries. I'm glad I picked sequences the first time.

Here's another odd story. I spent my junior year abroad with Budapest Semesters in Mathematics. Norton sent me a couple of letters while I was over there. At least one of which was covered with one and three cent stamps from 1950; I'm not that old. The envelope is still in the back of my scrap book from that year. It seemed a very Norton envelope. The letter is still inside the envelope and it too reads very much like listening to Norton talk as he tells me about a car accident and then dismisses it in favor of discussing the math I'm studying before returning to info about a friend of mine from Amherst; for his assumption that two female math/science swimmer types would be friends was of course correct.

Here's a more melancholy story. I don't remember the background to this story exactly. It was a Wednesday I'm pretty sure and for whatever reason I was depressed. I know there were some traumatic things during my freshman year, but as I recall now this was more of the midwinter blues. I was a diver so I had been back on campus since early January. I remember going into class and deciding that I just had to knit during class. I had had a professor yell at me during the fall about knitting in class so I had pretty much stopped doing it, but that day I just knew I had to knit. In the end not even the knitting was enough to help me hold it together and I essentially quietly cried my way through the end of class. This was really out of the ordinary for me. Dr. Starr wanted to talk to me about it. I don't remember the details of what was said, but I do know that Dr. Starr was concerned and he wanted to help me figure out what to do. In the end, he looked up train and bus schedules and figured out how to get me home for the weekend. He was so concerned that he offered to drive me to the train station so that I wouldn't have to walk from the bus station to the train station in Springfield. I know in the end I took the bus, and I learned an important lesson that sometimes when the stress gets to be too much you just have to walk away for awhile.

I mentioned earlier some traumatic events during my freshman year. A friend tried to commit suicide shortly before spring break. It was pretty devastating to all of us in a circle of friends. I remember talking to Norton about it. I also remember that the following spring when she succeeded, many of us went down for the funeral and Norton went with us. I know that he supported many of us through a fairly difficult time.

I'm a teacher now, and as I look back on my interactions with Norton I realize how many of my responses to situations are based on his. I have a reputation of always being available for extra help; my department chairs are continually impressed with how much time I will put in working with students one-on-one. Norton taught me that there is a lot to be gained by working with students that way. My husband always teases me about how I know my students as individuals; Norton took the time to get to know me and that gave him the credibility to reach out to me when I really needed help. Since I do know my students fairly well, I try to teach students to keep things in perspective and know when to take a break. I will watch for when they are emotionally fragile and need extra support or a break on an assignment. I learned a lot of math from Norton (even if I often felt lost), but I also learned a lot about what it means to be a good teacher.

Rachel Sunley Tyson '95



When I trace back my trajectory into academia, I inevitably find myself at Professor Starr's discrete mathematics course. The combination of his love of the subject, dry sense of humor, and genuine concern about his students both inside and outside the classroom opened my eyes not only to the breadth of mathematics but to the joys of teaching as well. I think many students will recall him leaving each class unperturbed by (but fully aware of) the swath of chalk that had somehow been transferred from the board to his chin over the course of the lecture. But I expect just as many will remember the attention he doled out to all of his students, whether they were feeling overwhelmed by the material or simply hungry for more. Professor Star, I wish you the best in your well-deserved retirement, and thank you again for everything.

Sincerely,

Tom Wexler '00



Dear Professor Starr,

Imagine my surprise when I received a letter opening with "Dear Mathematics Graduate." As one of your original flunkies in the fall semester of 1966, I could not be happier to join this select group. David Cox and Dan Velleman assumed too much when they found my name on your electronic rolodex.

However, I may have been one of your most academically successful flunkies. Thanks to you giving me a most undeserved 59 - I hate to think how low it really was - I was able to recover and graduate with my class in 1970, cum laude. Your gracious and humane treatment of me - and others I will add - made it possible for me to recover from a rough and eye-opening first semester freshman year to have a successful college experience. As you know, I then went on to law school and graduated with honors in 1973. I also later earned a MSc in economics (Public Administration and Public Policy) in 1985. Not to say that none of this academic achievement - not to mention 36 years as a practicing attorney, most of which were as an Assistant Attorney General for Vermont - would have occurred but for failing Math 11, but your class and treatment did more to help me develop into a grownup than any other class or experience in those formative college years. For this I will be forever grateful and indebted.

I had hoped to attend the reception this afternoon. But for reasons beyond my control, I am not able to be with you. I do think of you, and have often told of your seminal effect on my academic and professional careers. I wish the best for you and Irene in what I hope and trust will be many years of a happy and productive retirement. For selfish reasons, I hope you stay in the Amherst area so that we will be able to revisit at least next year at my 40th reunion and any other time I make it to Amherst, which has been all too infrequent.

With sincere thanks,

Tom Viall, '70



Thanks for the fun and enjoy your retirement professor!

now i need to figure out how to say it with a cryptic stamp...

-bill warden '86

“My first impression of Norton was one of the first impressions I had of being a student at Amherst as a freshman. In keeping with an apparent tradition of the College, we had Calculus class on that first Saturday of the fall semester. Professor Starr spoke with his characteristically endearing charm and enthusiasm about both the math in his lecture and also about the variety of fresh fruit that would be available at the farmer’s market if we hurried into town promptly after class. Particularly in the context of a beautiful New England fall day, that balanced appreciation of the different aspects of the environment we were all so lucky to be a part of made a strong impression on me as a world view and perspective I should aspire to share.

Professor Starr had apparently noticed that I often studied in the Math Library in the evenings, and later that semester he was in his office grading the exams for my class when he found he had a question about one of my answers. So he naturally came upstairs to see if he could find me and get me to explain my reasoning a little better. Unfortunately, my reasoning was equally undecipherable to me. As one can imagine, that fact imposed an upper limit on the cheerfulness of the remainder of the conversation, despite everyone’s best intentions. But not too long after I returned to my dorm room that night, Professor Starr called to let me know that I had done pretty well on the exam despite my issues with the particular problem he’d come asking about. My memory of that gesture, and what it said about Norton’s empathy and personal commitment to his students, has been a frequent reminder to me of the kind of person I would like to be.

Every time I’ve talked to Norton on my various visits to Amherst over the years, I am amazed that while I struggle to remember what happened last Tuesday, he remembers me and all my Amherst friends from 20 years ago, and has no shortage of news to share about other Amherst folk who are also important and interesting to me. Norton remains a wonderful friend for me, and the chances we’ve had to talk have been as comfortable and enjoyable in the years since I graduated as they were at the time I was a student there. I hope I’ll have the privilege of continuing opportunities to enjoy his company when I am back in town.”

Stephan Wielandy ‘90

Professor Starr,

I graduated in 1974, an immature and somewhat indifferent math major, and I did not take any of your classes. I went on to an MS in math and a 30-year engineering career which I enjoyed very much, and now it is my good fortune to enjoy my grown kids, volunteer engineering service, teaching, and music-making, after my own (early) retirement.

My purpose in writing, out of the blue, is to thank you for a rather blunt comment you've no doubt forgotten, making fun and complaining about my cigarette smoking - a complaint which we seldom have to make these days, thanks to the honesty and forthrightness of folks like you.

(Several years later I escaped the habit; since I still recall your remark I suspect it played a small part in my own decision, and I thank you for that too).

Best wishes,

Jim Whitehead '74



Unfortunately I don't anticipate being in town for the reception, but I was fortunate to have Prof. Starr for an Analysis class some time around 2004, and I wanted to leave a few brief words. In addition to his entertaining sense of humor, one thing I remember most about Prof. Starr was his ability to incorporate interesting puzzles and stories into the mathematics curriculum; one I still recall is how the Intermediate Value Theorem can be used to demonstrate that there always exists a rotation that can be applied to right a wobbly table--although I have employed this result with only mild success to a scratch and dent table I purchased a few years ago at Pier 1, still the story crosses my mind whenever I find myself at a diner or fussy picnic bench. Another math tale, a variant of the Buffon needle problem, is the approximation to pi by throwing stale baguettes over your shoulder onto the street. Just last week I found myself in France, with a baguette in my hand. Sadly, the baguette was still warm and fresh and therefore better suited to chewing than throwing. I hope my actions did not let Prof. Starr down.

I wish Prof. Starr the best in his retirement.

Sincerely,

Matt Willis '04

I'm happy to write down some memories of my time with Professor Starr. He's always been a wonderful, smiling part of Amherst. Please feel free to edit my comments.

This year my home schooled son, Zeb, is taking an online AP Calculus class that doesn't have a specified textbook so instead he has a collection of texts. One of the books that he's using is my old textbook from Math 12. It still had my math placement exam folded inside it. Another one is a book which Professor Starr gave me from his vast office book collection.

Math 12 with Professor Starr was one of those defining Amherst moments for me. It was taught early in the morning and demanded real thinking. The memorize and return methodology of high school was clearly inadequate. And my previously acquired time management skills were definitely in need of some help. I remember once Professor Starr explaining that he wore such brilliantly colored ties to help Miss Carty stay awake in his class. And I remember him wearing socks and sandals all the year long, and even to class. I'd gone to twelve years of Catholic school and no teacher had ever worn socks and sandals to class. And I remember him being kind, and bringing in cocoa and tea (I think) one morning with an exam.

Part way through the course, I used my freshman drop option to drop the course from my schedule. I didn't want the C that I was afraid that I was going to get. But I didn't want stop learning the math so I continued to go to class. I don't remember at all if I wrote the final!

I did learn a lot math, and more importantly, I expanded those skills involved in synthesizing separate bits of knowledge to create a new whole.

Since then, when I've come back to Amherst for alumni events or just to visit, I've tried to visit with Professor Starr. He's always remembered me and made time to chat. He's a very generous man with his time, knowledge and tangible reminders of math in our lives. I have one of his Tecumseh lithographs in my office. He gave me a wooden puzzle made by an Australian math professor, and that sits on my desk. And in my basement, there's a stack of textbooks from his office which wait their turn to become home school math courses.

Professor Starr will always be part of Amherst to me. I hope that even though he will no longer teach classes that he will continue to be part of the fabric of Amherst lives.

Sincerely,

Lisa Carty Wood '85

I am one of those Amherst graduates who never took a course with Norton Starr, but who wish very much that they had. Many of this group, who are legion, have taken this wish a step further by claiming to Norton with pride and pleasure that they were in his class, when in fact they never were! But Norton is never fooled, although not that it matters: he seems to remember everyone who passes through Amherst, in or out of his classes, whether or not they even studied math at all, and he takes interest in and follows their paths long after they leave Amherst.

I discovered this myself when I first came to know Norton at the time of my 25th Class Reunion. Our class was reputed to have had the highest dropout rate in the history of the College, so I wrote an essay for the Class Reunion book that touched upon a "darker" side of life at Amherst: those minority of students who do not do well, because of personal or other difficulties, and what more the College might do to help such students. A Reunion book is naturally intended for members of the Class, and it never occurred to me that anyone else, especially faculty, would read these essays. Imagine my astonishment when I received an email reply from Norton detailing his own thoughts on the matters I raised. When I eventually came to his office and introduced myself as the author of that essay, I found out he had an entire shelf dedicated to such Class Reunion Books. And hearing of his own experiences helping many such students was a revelation. It was the first of many long and gratifying discussions on that and many other subjects over my visits to Amherst in the years to follow.

About a year after that first acquaintance, professional circumstances led me to return to school to earn a Master's Degree in Computer Science. Needing to both refresh and further my math knowledge required for the program, I emailed Norton to ask for some suggestions for textbooks in calculus, discrete math, probability and statistics, and linear algebra. That evening, my phone rang: it was Norton, who had looked me up in the alumni directory, calling to confirm my address so he could send me a whole stack of texts from his library! During my years working towards the degree and afterwards, Norton continued to be a source of books, advice, and ideas about math and other subjects, technical and non-technical, often drawing upon his wealth of constant contact with other alumni. In fact no matter what subject our discussions touched upon, Norton had books on it that he wanted to share, and I rarely left his office after a visit without taking home one or more volumes.

While all of us alumni relish our Amherst years for the close and often enduring contact with faculty, Norton epitomizes that phenomenon more than anyone I know. He is consistently and remarkably prompt in replying to emails, often within minutes and even during the middle of the night (does the man ever sleep?!). He has been a constant at reunions and homecomings. I've never known him to not appear at any class event upon invitation (he gets many), and he is as eager and voluble at them as the alumni themselves. A typical Norton query after some event is of the type: "who was that who was asking about such-and-such? I want to send them some information/books/etc." And I will always remember when he and Irene were hurriedly packing for a trip the following day to a conference in Europe, but still took the time to attend a celebratory reception for the birth of my daughter.

It's hard to imagine that I will no longer be able to go up to the 5th floor of Seeley Mudd and find the door to Norton's office open, books crammed on the shelves and stacked everywhere, and Norton sitting at the desk, happy, no matter how busy he is, to receive an impromptu visitor. Yet knowing how much Norton craves the interaction with students past and present, I suspect it's not going to stop, but will just adapt to fit this new phase of his life.

To me and many others, Norton Starr is an honorary Amherst alumnus for life. May we all have many more years with him among us!

Best wishes,

Rob Yamins '72



“During the academic year, Friday brings the beautiful freedom of the summer month of June, while Saturday is a wild vacation like July, but Sunday soon rushes by to bring us to the foreboding atmosphere we associate with late August.”

Norton Starr  
Professor of Mathematics

