

SCHOLARSHIP, TENACITY, BRILLIANCE: REMEMBERING PAUL SCHAFFEL '12

Paul Schaffel '12 was, by all accounts, a brilliant young man who had found his niche at Wesleyan, particularly in the history department under the mentorship of Professor William Pinch.

Tragically, he died on September 16, of anaplastic large-cell lymphoma (ALCL), a rare form of the disease. His thesis remains a contribution to academic discourse and a tantalizing “what if” to the scholarship he could have offered his field. His loss creates a heartbreaking absence to all who knew him, just as his life was an inspiring story of courage and determination.

His mother, Ellen Walker, traces the blossoming of his academic achievement to Wesleyan. “He was a free spirit in his desire to create his own curriculum,” she recalls. On campus, he shed his earlier shyness, expanded his network of friends, fell in love, and soaked up academics as much as he could.

His girlfriend, Bridget Read '12, remembers the young man she loved as a “tenacious learner” who took on 800-page tomes for recreational reading and managed to finish all his coursework each Monday, the better to jokingly taunt friends later in the week as they struggled through late nights of study.

“He had a huge capacity for remembering information and understanding complex concepts,” she recalls.

Early in his undergraduate career, Schaffel was intrigued by Professor Pinch’s course, *India and the West*. “He really took to it,” recalls Pinch. “He was thoughtful and bright, a kid whose prose sparkled.

“We kept in touch after that,” he adds. On a semester abroad in Stockholm, Schaffel became interested in post-colonial populations settling in Britain, and Pinch recalls e-mails asking for recommendations on what to read next.

He returned with a commitment to civic engagement, recalls Read, seeking a way to combine his double major of history and psychology. “He was putting all his experiences together and was eager to change the world.”

Pinch was delighted when Schaffel approached him about advising his honors thesis. “He and I bounced ideas off each other and settled on the topic of Indian student radicals in London at the turn of the



Paul Schaffel '12, a “tenacious learner,” died on September 16.

20th century and British attempts to control them,” he recalls. Schaffel won a small department fellowship for summer research in London, where he combed through primary source material in the “India Office Records” at the British Library.

Back on campus in the fall of 2011, he took the LSAT, began law school applications, and met with his mentor on a weekly basis. By the end of the semester, though, Pinch was worried. His student had a terrible cough and didn’t look well at all. Pinch could tell that Paul was concerned also.

At home Schaffel received a diagnosis of lymphoma, but he, Read, and his family had every reason to believe that his treatment would be successful. Consequently, this private young man shared the diagnosis with only a few people.

He did speak to his Dean, applying for—and receiving—medical leave. Instead of accepting it, though, he took his final exams and completed the papers of the fall semester, determined to graduate with his class. True to his strong work ethic, he had already completed his BA coursework that December. Only his thesis—for honors—remained.

Schaffel insisted he could work while undergoing chemotherapy—and Read, Walker, and Pinch rallied around. Schaffel lived at home and muscled through the reading, thinking, and writing process. He’d order texts he needed from Olin Library, and Pinch would ship or Read would hand-deliver them.

In between requests, Pinch would wait.

“There were times I wouldn’t hear from him for weeks and I’d wonder what was happening, but I didn’t want to push,” Pinch recalls. “And then suddenly I’d get these chapters by e-mail that were finished quality.”

Family friend Ellen Gendler '77, M.D., was witness to the depths Schaffel plumbed to reach this success: “He endured several months of therapies that frequently left him close to death. He bore this all with a strength I have never seen before as a physician, determined to get through his coursework so that his goals would not be foiled. The gift of his mind, the fortitude of his heart, and the sheer power of his resolve got him to graduation.”

He attended, receiving his degree with honors, although the heat and exertion took its toll on him, despite IV fluids beforehand.

He had been accepted to nine of the 10 top law schools to which he applied and had chosen Harvard, deferring until the fall of 2013 with the hope that he’d be well enough by then. Pinch broached the subject of publishing Schaffel’s thesis, and he was eager to begin further edits. Instead, his illness overtook him and he died at home. Carloads of classmates and friends came to his funeral to recognize the impact Paul had on them and to convey that to his grieving family.

Pinch has been finishing the plan to publish the thesis and is sharing it with colleagues around the world. “I e-mailed it to a contact in Ireland, who is kind of an expert in this stuff, and she was blown away by it. And I sent it to a scholar who does late 19th-, early 20th-century British Indian history—one of the top people in the field for Indians in Britain—and she also loved it.

“And then I had a really interesting experience where I was at a dinner party in Delhi, with a colleague who works on a related subject. She happened to have found the thesis online. She told me, completely unprovoked, that it is an excellent thesis. And she couldn’t believe it was for a BA.”

Says Gendler: “Paul’s story should inspire us to celebrate life,” she says, “and to recognize the importance of the little things that shape our lives as they relate to others.”

[Ellen Walker is pursuing one of her son’s goals: funding research for a cure for ALCL. Formed shortly after Paul Schaffel’s death, *The Paul Walker Schaffel Foundation* (aka *The Paul Foundation*), is seeking approval as a 501(c)(3). For more information, contact Ellen Walker, Esq., at 212/421-2111 or at ewalker@pwsfoundation.org.]