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Computers and the Law Professor Dunne dies

By Victor Zapana
Staff Reporter

Robert Dunne, the fiction writer who loved sailing, Christmas and E. B. White — and the Yale lecturer who successfully merged law and computer science in the classroom, enticing hundreds of students to study piracy and cyberspace — was found dead this month in a vacation cottage he was renting in Rhode Island. He was 59.

The exact cause of death is not yet known, according to the state health department. But police said Dunne, who taught the popular course “Computers and the Law,” died of head injuries sustained in an accidental fall down a flight of stairs.

A caretaker for the Block Island house Dunne was renting found the senior lecturer on the morning of Aug. 16 and called police at about 9:30 a.m., New Shoreham police chief Vincent Carlone said. Dunne, a senior lecturer in Yale’s Computer Science Department, was pronounced dead at the scene.

“As you can imagine, we are all in shock,” Computer Science Department Chair Avi Silberschatz said.

It was not clear exactly when Dunne died, but Carlone said it appeared he fell backwards as he climbed the stairs from the cottage’s first floor to second and struck his head on a tile floor shortly before he was found Saturday.

Medical examiners are not yet ready to announce a cause of death, Rhode Island Department of Health spokeswoman Annemarie Beardsworth said Wednesday, because they are awaiting test results.

Dunne was born in Bronx, N.Y., and grew up in the borough, attending Horace Mann School in New York as a teenager. He matriculated at Columbia University and later transferred to Fordham University, graduating with a bachelor’s degree in English, daughter Julia Dunne said.

He performed a slew of odd jobs throughout the 1970s and 1980s, including stints as a tour guide for NBC studios and as an assistant at New York University, where he met Julia Dunne’s mother, former wife Marti Dunne.

Shortly after receiving his law degree at the University of Connecticut School of Law in 1996, Dunne served as attorney and consultant for various Internet software companies. Up until his death, he served as a legal consultant for Revolution Computing, located in New Haven.

Dunne joined the Yale faculty in 1999, after 13 years as an administrator in the Computer Science Department. During his time at the University, he served as a fellow of Silliman College and as a co-director of the Center for Internet Studies. Meanwhile, in 2003, he published a short story, "Paradise Night Shift," about his life at home and with his family.

In an e-mail to the News, fellow co-director and computer-science professor David Gelernter called him "one of the best people I ever met at Yale and one of the best men I ever knew."

"He was self-effacing always, ready to help anyone in just about any capacity," Gelernter wrote. "He leaves a void that will be impossible to fill because he was unique — in his knowledge, his abilities and his never-failing decency and kindness."

Dunne was an ever-popular undergraduate professor during his time at the University. The Yale chapter of Phi Beta Kappa awarded him the William Clyde DeVane Medal, the highest honor conferred for undergraduate teaching at Yale, in 2006.

Of the lectures he taught, it was the thrice-weekly class "Computers and the Law" that became his hallmark.

Among Yale's most heavily enrolled courses in recent history, "Computers and the Law" invited all students, especially those with no experience in either field, to read dozens of court cases, from Connecticut's legal battle against Web site The Drudge Report to the advertising war between the Coca-Cola Company and Tropicana Products, Inc.

The class centered on Dunne's academic passion: analyzing the legal and sociological problems that arise from Internet usage.

"He showed a sincere love for teaching and an even stronger love for life, both of which seemed to infect everyone in class," said Paul Wainer '11, an alumnus of Dunne's popular course. "He is irreplaceable."

Although Silberschatz said shortly after Dunne's death that he intended for the course to remain as one of the department's offerings, ultimately the effort was unsuccessful. The department has canceled the class for the fall, Judith Smith, department senior administrative assistant and Dunne's former assistant, said Thursday. She added that "nothing has been decided yet" about a process to find a replacement professor for Dunne's spring courses.

Dunne would often talk about the students in his class, Julia Dunne said. He would especially discuss the excuses his students gave for extensions on final papers.

“His favorite one was going to Yankee games [from] big Yankee fans,” she said. “Those were the people that he was likely giving extensions to ... His favorites were ones that were sports-related, and he would go on and on [about] all the craziness” of the class.

She added: “He was always grinning from ear to ear, and he can laugh at just about anything.”

Dunne is survived by Marti Dunne, his brother and Julia Dunne.

Marti and Julia Dunne, working with the Computer Science Department, plan to hold a memorial service at Battell Chapel on Sept. 13. The family asks that any donations be made to either the Cold Spring School in New Haven or the Block Island Nature Conservancy.

—Thomas Kaplan contributed reporting.