

An advocate for many, a loss for all: Remembering Professor Elaine Salo

Campus News, News, The Centerpiece September 6, 2016



Courtesy of Colin Miller

Prof. Salo will be remembered for her gentle nature, intelligence, and research on women and gender issues.

BY SEASON COOPER SENIOR REPORTER

While visiting his father's home in South Africa, Colin Miller ended up marrying the girl next door — literally. Miller, a professor of music education and the director of the university's Global Arts Program, was married to Dr. Elaine Salo for twenty-eight years until her death on Aug. 13 following a battle with cancer. She was 54.

Beginning at the university in 2014, Salo taught in both the Political Science department and the Women's Studies department. Known for her gentle nature, intelligence, and research on women and gender issues, Salo was also an activist who made an impact through her involvement in the apartheid movement.

"We basically use the arts to create platforms for anti-apartheid protests, we would organize concerts and the concerts would be rallies," Miller said. "We also organized community music schools that allowed both white and black people to come together so we can challenge the system in that type of way."

Under the apartheid system, South Africa was in a state of emergency. The state of emergency allowed the ban of protests, and gathering of more than ten people. Upon seeing the effect it had on the country, Miller and Salo decided to make a difference.

"People who were political activists and a lot of young people were being arrested so we had a safe house and offered them a safe place to stay for a week or so," Miller said. When the cops would show up and check on us and we laughed about it but at the time but it was quite serious."

Salo's commitment to helping others served as the impetus behind many of her actions. With a strong focus on education, women's rights and creating opportunities for the marginalized and disenfranchised, Salo stayed busy doing right by others.

"There would always be people coming by our house," Miller said. "Elaine always engaged with broader community beyond the university, beyond the church, beyond community organizations."

Salo's personal experiences also made her a strong advocate for access to education. As a student during apartheid Salo was required to carry a permit in order to attend university, a requirement for any student of color during the time. Despite these obstacles, Salo received her bachelor's degree from the University of Cape Town, and eventually earn her Ph.D. from Emory University in 2004.

Utilizing her position as a professor and her connections in the world of academia Salo strove to pave the way to ensure success for her students on campus and off.

"As a person, she was incredibly kind and caring," junior Harry Lewis said. "She would literally do anything for her students, and if you showed an interest in her classes she would show an interest in you."

Lewis would have taken his third class with Salo this September. He was also enrolled in her upcoming study abroad program during the winter of 2017.

"She invited me and another classmate to dinner before her Fulbright lecture because she thought it was something we would be interested in — just little things like that which showed she cared," he said.

Her kindness and devotion opened doors and inspired many of her students. Valerie Frasier, a recent graduate of the class of 2016, saw Salo as a mentor and credited her class as being a "sanctuary" for students to express themselves and engage in open debates.

"Dr. Salo knew I wanted to be a lawyer and eventually get my Ph.D.," Frasier said. "She has shaped me into the woman I am today, and as I continue my education into law school I know she would still want me to help those who are in need."

Even from the students she worked closely with, many said that Salo's vibrant personality shined through.

"If anything, she was so witty," sophomore Iris Turner said. "She had such a quick tongue."

"She would just say things in a hushed tone and would not always catch it and then she would just laugh at herself. She would leave you there thinking, 'did she just say something?' and it would be hilarious," Turner said with a smile.

Laura Holt, who graduated from the university in 2016, thought of Salo as a "truly wonderful person." The two met first through Salo's "Politics of Water" course, and eventually grew closer as Holt worked as Salo's research assistant for the past two years.

"UD lost a professor that put the best interests of students above everything else," Holt said. "She gave me my first job in academia, making sure that I was paid fairly for my work and for that I will always be grateful."

Salo's death was a loss to many to the university community and beyond. Tweets, Facebook posts and blogs from scholars and admirers of Salo were numerous upon the news of her death. Through her work as a professor, and as a wife and friend, her impact is felt by all who worked with her and knew her work.

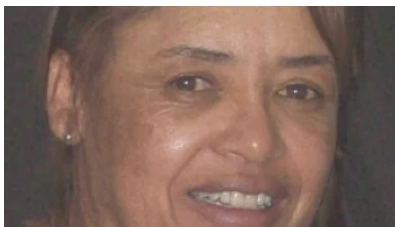
"When she looked at you her eyes were an open window, she acknowledged you immediately and she welcomed you in," Miller said. "It did not matter if you were a house cleaner, or if there were differences in class or race. She made no distinctions — it was all about a person's humanity."

Salo is survived by her husband and two children. A service celebrating her life will be held at 5 p.m. on Thursday in Gore Recital Hall of the Roselle Center for the Arts. A reception will follow.

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