NEWS

"Drink some wine 'til we get drunk"
CRUSH DAVE MATTHEWS BAND

Local professor honored with stories after accidental death

BY JINGCHU SOPHIA ZHANG AND KARISSA CHENG
STAFF REPORTER AND CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Over 500 family, friends, colleagues and current and former Southern Connecticut State University students gathered in laughter and tears on Sunday to celebrate the life of Mike Shea, an SCSU English professor who died last month.

Shea died on Oct. 24 from injuries sustained in a hit-and-run e-bike accident on Whalley Avenue two weeks earlier. The e-bike rider has not yet been identified. Shea worked at SCSU since 1985, teaching courses in Shakespeare, drama and film. Rather than gifts or flowers, Shea's family requested donations to the "Let's See a Play: Mike Shea Student Performance Fund" to support student attendance at theater and performing arts events.

Shea's passion for theater also inspired the structure of the Sunday celebration of his life, which was hosted at SCSU's John Lyman Center for the Performing Arts. Shea's former students and actors from the Elm Shakespeare Company opened the event with a performance of a scene from "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Shea was a longtime board member of the company.

The rest of the event was split into "acts," which grouped speakers based on their relationship to Shea. First, family members shared stories and memories of Shea, followed by his earliest students, then colleagues and friends and finally, his recent students.

"Mike lived his entire life completely unburdened by social insecurity, and this freedom allowed him to ask risky questions, questions that almost anyone else wouldn't get away with," Katherine Kruger, Shea's daughter, said to the crowd. "Most of all, living without the threat of embarrassment allowed Mike to engage in the world with absolute sincerity."

Life, advocacy and teaching

In the event's first act, titled "Little Brother, Uncle, Male Parental Unit," Shea's family — from his youngest granddaughter to his older siblings — and longtime friends spoke about Shea's impact on their lives.

"I've been really lucky," Robert Shea, Shea's brother, told the crowd. "Thanks to Mike, I experienced genuine brotherly love."

He drew laughter from attendees as he recalled stories about his brother, spanning from their childhood to recent years, recalling when seven-year-old Mike typed up a one-line "autobiography," writing, "My life is miserable because of my big brother Robert James Shea. The end."

Like other family members who spoke before and after him, Robert Shea recalled his brother's humor, wisdom and kindness.

"When it comes down to it, in essence, Michael was a good man," Robert Shea said. "He was a humanist concerned with human welfare, values and dignity. He was devoted to the humanities and the arts and the elevation of the people around him."

In subsequent acts, Shea's students and colleagues spoke highly of his dedication to teaching and to the humanities, especially the SCSU English Department. During his time at the university, Shea served as department chair and helped shape Honors College curriculum and student theses, according to SCSU's announcement for the Sunday event.

In his seminar-style courses, Shea sat students in a circle of chairs, and also incorporated performance activities and short writing exercises to draw them out of their comfort zones, recalled Phil Smith. Smith is a retired SCSU professor who co-taught courses with Shea.

Former SCSU student Rex Krueger said Shea "changed my life." Like many students who spoke at the event, Krueger said he arrived at SCSU without a clear sense of direction, but found it through Shea's guidance and mentorship.

"He knew how to punch right through whatever defenses you had: late teenage cynicism, boredom, detachment," Krueger said to the crowd. After graduating from college, Krueger decided to attend graduate school and went on to teach English for 11 years because of Shea.

"I took a lot from Mike's teaching," he added.

'His infectious snort of laughter'

Shea's sense of humor emerged as a theme across the speeches at the celebration of life.

"Humor, wit, gags, physical comedy were immeasurable parts of my life with Mike," Jack Lange, a lifelong friend of Shea's, said to the crowd.

In his speech, Lange recalled a particular instance in which he and Shea were admonished by a store manager for creating a nuisance.

"The manager said, and I'm quoting, 'You don't hear too good,'" Lange said. "Aspiring English professor Shea retorted, 'Did you major in English?' The manager — I think I remember it pretty accurately — replied, 'Did you major in Smartmouth?'"

Eleanor Kruger, Shea's oldest granddaughter, said to the crowd that she will always "remember how silly and fun he was" and said Shea was the only grandparent she knew who would swim in the pool.

Joel Dodson, one of Shea's colleagues at SCSU, reminisced about seeing a plethora of plays with him. As part of his speech, he presented "Instructions on How to See a Play Like Mike," recalling Shea's quirky habits and ability to make friends with anyone he encountered.



COURTESY OF KARI SWANSON

Southern Connecticut State University held a celebration on Sunday to honor Mike Shea, an English professor who died in an e-bike hit-and-run last month. During the two-hour event, family, friends, colleagues and students gathered to share memories of Shea.

"Buy the best seats in the house; don't worry, it's going on your wife's credit card," Dodson read before the crowd. "Get dinner beforehand. Go to your old favorite spot, or a cheap hole-in-the-wall, or literally anywhere else, however expensive. See above regarding your wife's credit card. Order appetizers. Chat with the waiter and learn their life story. That story matters as much as the one you're about to see."

In an activity between two acts, attendees completed a writing assignment in which they recounted the greatest, and "preferably the funniest and silliest," story they had about Shea. The assignment was a reference to Shea's signature in-class writing activity, in which he had his students write a response to a question in five minutes at the start of every class. After attendees recorded their answers, they shared them with each other.

"It's hard to imagine not sharing scenes like this with Mike again, or hearing his infectious snort of laughter," former SCSU student Steve Mark said to the crowd. "But we know the pranks he pulled, the lessons he taught, the love of the arts he encouraged, the kindness he exemplified, will endure for us all."

A man of values

Speakers also recalled Shea's proclivity for collecting and keeping objects he gathered. Kate Bellmore, Shea's teaching assistant, told the crowd about how she was once tasked with organizing his office. He told her to not get rid of anything, because, as she remembered him saying, "everything in here has value."

"Amid the piles of syllabi and coursework and paperwork, I found action figurines, some without limbs," Bellmore said to the crowd. "A lot of SCSU mailroom bins — and I don't think he was supposed to have those — full of sealed envelopes, notes, just endless notes on scraps of paper, endless clippings. It felt like a cabinet of curiosities."

Through cleaning Shea's office and seeing his joy at all the "resurfaced curiosities," Bellmore said, she also came to appreciate Shea's view that every object in the room had value.

"To Mike, value was people," Bellmore said. "The silly toys, the jots on scrap paper, represent the relationships and memories that he made with all of us. If you ever wrote Mike Shea a note in the last 40-plus years, I think it's still in the office. He valued it because he valued you."

At the end of the celebration, Candace Barrington, Shea's wife and an English professor at Central Connecticut State University, brought a few of Shea's many belongings onstage and, with the help of her granddaughter, Eleanor, used them to tell stories about Shea's values.

Among other things, the two showed the crowd Shea's overflowing workbag, which Barrington said demonstrated Shea's commitment to teaching and service; a strip of toilet paper, which he used in one of his many pranks and lottery tickets, which he bought a pair of every week in hopes of winning money to fund scholarships for SCSU English majors.

In the reception area outside of the auditorium, a table displayed picture frames with ticket stubs Shea had collected throughout his life. A sign emphasized that these were only "some" from his vast collection.

"Mike didn't just see potential. He loved people and things for what they were at that very moment," Barrington said. "Why wouldn't he hold on to friendships across decades and continents? Why wouldn't he keep things that hold inherent value just by existing?"

Brian Johnson, a colleague of Shea's in the SCSU English department, said that he "owed his teaching life to Mike." After applying to a full-time position at SCSU twice unsuccessfully, he felt dejected, he said.

But Shea convinced him to apply a third time, and Johnson got the job. Their offices were across from each other, and chatting with Shea became a cherished part of Johnson's workdays, he said.

"Two weeks before his accident, I saw Mike in the English department kitchen," Johnson recalled in front of the crowd. "I asked him how he was doing, and shaking his head, almost crying, he said, 'I'm blessed. Candace, the students. I am so blessed.'"

"Because he felt his own blessings so deeply, blessings tumbled out of him, countless, wondrous," Johnson continued. "And here we are in the unending light of the blessings he gave us."

Southern Connecticut State University's John Lyman Center for the Performing Arts is located at 501 Crescent St.

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Activists boycott restaurant for failure to compensate worker

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A group of workers and activists on Saturday announced a boycott of a Fair Haven restaurant that they said failed to compensate a former employee for "lost wages and emotional distress" in compliance with a state commission's order.

In January, Connecticut's human rights referee, Komla Matrevi, found that Taqueria Oyamales had violated two anti-discrimination statutes in its treatment of an employee, Carolina Sanchez, who alleged that her employer sexually assaulted her in 2023. Matrevi ordered the business to pay $77,680 to Sanchez.



ALEX HUNGS / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

On Saturday, more than a month after the restaurant Taqueria Oyamales was due to pay $77,680 to an employee for "lost wages and emotional distress," according to a state court order, community members protested outside the restaurant.

In April, the state's Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities filed an action to request that a state court enforce the terms of the initial compensation order. On July 23, the Superior Court of the Judicial District of Hartford set an Oct. 1 deadline for the payment. According to activists with Unidad Latina en Acción, a local immigrant advocacy group, the business has yet to pay Sanchez.

"Employers in New Haven cannot abuse workers, ignore a state ruling, and expect business as usual," John Jairo Lugo, the community organizing director for Unidad Latina en Acción, said in a Thursday press release announcing the boycott. "Until the owners of Tacos Oyameles pay the $80,000 ordered by the CHRO, we are asking our community and allies not to spend a dime there."

Around 25 people stood outside the restaurant on Saturday afternoon, holding banners that read "Unidad Latina en Acción" and "porque solo el pueblo salva al pueblo," a workers' rights slogan in Spanish that translates in English to "because only the people can save the people."

When cars honked at the protesters' signs, the protesters cheered. Two leaders chanted "Boycott" into megaphones, while other protestors responded with chants of "Taqueria Oyameles."

When approached for comment on Saturday, an employee at Taqueria Oyameles asked a reporter from the News to leave the restaurant.

Paul Garlinghouse, a New Haven-based family law attorney, said he attended the protest because ULA contacted him about the case earlier this year.

"If you do something wrong, which they did, then you pay up," Garlinghouse said, referring to the restaurant. "If you don't pay up, it's really unfair to make her chase down a lawyer and try to enforce it herself."

In September, ULA activists protested outside of Taqueria Oyamales to demand that the restaurant heed the Oct. 1 compensation deadline and to celebrate the court's compensation order — alongside a settlement in a labor rights case against another local restaurant — as victories for New Haven's immigrant community. At the time, Lugo told the News that ULA would decide "collective actions" to take with respect to Sanchez's case after the Oct. 1 deadline came.

Community members first boycotted Taqueria Oyamales in 2023 when Sanchez initially alleged mistreatment, Sanchez said in a September interview.

"Our labor rights don't stop at the door of our workplaces, and they don't depend on immigration status," Debora Gonzalez, senior national safety and health coordinator at the National Day Laborer Organizing Network said, according to the Thursday press release. "Workers are coming together this Saturday to demand justice, and continue building real solidarity across our neighborhoods."

When it was founded in 1943 as the Connecticut Inter-Racial Commission, the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities was the first official civil rights agency in the nation, according to its website.

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