

'Most beloved' AU faculty member, Dr. Gail Walker, dies

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Dr. Gail C. Walker, professor of psychology at Alfred University for the past 24 years, died Tuesday, June 7, 2005, after a nearly four-year struggle with ovarian cancer. Even though she learned mid-way through the spring semester that her treatment options were exhausted, "Doc Walker," as she was known to her students, continued teaching her courses and was on hand at graduation just three weeks ago. Born March 24, 1952, in Antlers, OK, the daughter of Forrest and Melba (Hair) Walker, she attended Clayton High School, where she graduated as valedictorian. In her essay "Sunset and Moonrise: Reflections on living with terminal illness," which Gail wrote and posted on Thanatolinks (<http://www.llds.com/death>), she said that she "went to school with people from 137 different Native American tribes, which changed my world view and my dance steps forever." She earned a B.S. in psychology with a minor in political science in 1974; a master's in psychology in 1976 and a Ph.D. in psychology in 1978, all from Oklahoma State University, where she was named a member of Phi Kappa Phi honor scholastic fraternity and Phi Delta Kappa, the honor education fraternity. She began her teaching career in 1978 at Marian College in Fond-du-Lac, WI; spent a year at the Cook County Office of Special Education in Chicago, IL, before answering an ad placed by Alfred University for a visiting assistant professor of psychology, a one-year appointment, in 1981. Twenty-four years later, Doc Walker was still at AU. "Students regarded her as the single most-beloved professor among the current faculty members," said AU President Charles M. Edmondson. "Her colleagues join her students in mourning her death. Gail brought a unique warmth and quality of friendship to her relationship with students. She is truly irreplaceable." During her tenure at AU, Dr. Walker earned the University's most-coveted Excellence-in-Teaching Award a record 12 times, with the most recent award bestowed at Honors Convocation in April, but she was quick to point out that two other current faculty members - Dr. Wes Bentz in chemistry and Frank Duserick in business - are what she referred to as "double-digit winners." They each have received the award 10 times. "I have always loved Alfred University," Dr. Walker wrote, but what she really meant was that she loved the students with whom she came in contact. Her curriculum vitae proudly lists, "Career total of students taught: 12,064 by Spring Semester 2005." She knew each of their names, and expected them to know the names of all the other students in the classes they took with her. "I always remember that I'm teaching students, as well as teaching the content area," Dr. Walker said. Getting to know her students on a personal level and having conversations with them - not just lecturing to them in class - "made it much more personal and interesting, and much more fun for me and them." She said that the years students spent with her were "exciting times in their lives," and she was privileged to be able to "help shape the grown ups they'll become." While she taught many different courses over the time she spent at AU, most often she taught "Introduction to Psychology," "Human Sexuality," and "Death and Dying." To her, the spectrum represented "the Alpha and the Omega," from conception (Human Sexuality), through life (Introduction to Psychology) and then to the end of life (Death and Dying.). A recognized expert in thanatology and dealing with grief, Dr. Walker worked with pioneers in the field, including Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. She drew her scholarly pursuits and her volunteer work as an emergency medical technician together to become an expert in grief therapy, crisis intervention and crisis debriefing, helping emergency personnel deal with psychological trauma and stress associated with their jobs. That expertise led to her being named to a delegation to the U.S.S.R. in 1988. Widely published, Dr. Walker continued her research and writing, as well as her teaching, even after learning in fall 2001 that she had ovarian cancer. She wrote a chapter on medical euthanasia published in Handbook of Death and Dying; Vol. One: The Presence of Death (Sage Publications, 2003), and had two works in process, "Double Jeopardy: Sexual behavior, substance abuse, and dishonesty in young adults," scheduled to be published by The Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, and "Medical Euthanasia: A comparison of the attitudes of health care workers and university students," in process for Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying. She was a member of the Foundation of Thanatology, the National Crisis Prevention Institute, the Association for Death Education and Counseling, the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, and the International Association of Nonviolent Crisis Intervention Certified Instructors. Dr. Walker is survived by her domestic partner and companion, Yvonne Squadrilli; her parents; two sisters, Judy Walker of Joplin, MO, and Barbara Erwin of Lindley, OK, and several nieces and nephews. Her final words for her students, colleagues, family and friends, dictated to Yvonne just prior to her death were "Tell everyone good bye and God bless. Love, Doc Walker." Following a private service for family and close friends, Dr. Walker will be buried in Oklahoma. A memorial service to be conducted by the Rev. Laurie DeMott at the Union University Church in Alfred will be held in the fall after students return to the

University. Condolences may be sent to Yvonne Squadrilli, PO Box 3, Alfred Station, NY 14803. In response to several inquiries about how to make a contribution in memory of Dr. Gail Walker, the University has established a memorial fund in her name. Those wishing to contribute to the fund should make their checks payable to Alfred University, and send them to Alfred University, University Relations, 1 Saxon Drive, Alfred, NY 14802. In the memo line on the check, please make sure you indicate that the money is to be used for Dr. Walker's memorial. We will consult with the family to determine how the funds are to be used. Should you have questions about the Gail Walker Memorial Fund, please contact University Relations at 607.871.2144 or e-mail the Alumni and Community Relations office.