I.  
I arrived in Alaska just in time to hear the funeral ceremony for former Governor Jay Hammond. Hammond was arguably Alaska’s most popular politician and governor, and many of the speakers quoted from his speeches. A recurring theme was Hammond’s belief that there were “two Alaskas” – one good, principled, civic minded, generous of resources and spirit, and the other, not-so much. You could probably say the same thing about any town, state, or country, but when my colleague Dr. Sandra Stokes passed away last month, I thought of Hammond’s phrase. Sandy personified Wisconsin the good.

II.  
Before you accept a job at a college, prospective colleagues often act as if they’re your new best friends during the hiring process. Once hired there is often a sea change, and these new colleagues will often cool you out on arrival. Work is work, and life outside of work is often kept separate from work for a variety of reasons. First there’s the politics. Administrators often pit professors against one another in efforts to divide and conquer. Then there’s the fight for diminishing resources. There’s also the fear and reality of familiarity breeding contempt.

Before accepting positions at UWGB we were told to negotiate technology into our contracts. My new computer was set up in my office when I arrived. It was particularly slow and not the latest vintage.

Quite a number of my colleagues walked into my office extended a hand for shaking and then withdrew it to point at the “new” computer on my desk. “That was supposed to be my computer! I was next on the list!” they would exclaim.

“Nice to meet you, too,” I’d reply and then try to explain how I’d negotiated my technology. I don’t believe this placated or endeared me to them, particularly some of the more senior members of the department who had the power of life or death over my career. I later learned some of them had marched right down to the dean and/or department chair to complain. “We can’t do anything about it. He negotiated his technology,” they were told.

Later I would try to suppress a snicker when these colleagues apologized and/or complimented me on having the smarts to negotiate my technology. Some said they forgave me, telling me I had no way of knowing that “leapfrogging others was un-collegial.” Quite a number told me the dean and/or chair had assured them they were next on the list.

One of the exceptions was Sandy Stokes. It’s hard to successfully resist the temptation to describe her as bubbly, but her enthusiasm, energy, and quick and sincere laugh often brought that word to mind. She gave me the kind of welcome I then resolved to bestow on all new department faculty members. As colleague...
A Tribute to Dr. Sandra Stokes

after colleague entered my office to protest my getting the “new” computer, Sandy and I would exchange knowing looks and try to suppress laughter. Thank God Sandy was not very good at that. Whenever one of us would walk into the other’s office and see the other typing away, we’d point and say, “Hey, that was supposed to be my computer.”

Over the next sixteen years Sandy remained a colleague in the best sense of the word. She was always supportive and constructive, never petty. She genuinely appreciated the efforts and accomplishments of her colleagues. They could count on a congratulatory phone call, email or note after they’d published an article, presented at a conference or received some other form of recognition.

III.

It was the time of new state and federal standards and testing. We’d be invited to these conference sessions, and “experts” would come to faculty meetings and lecture us or brief us on the progress of various initiatives. It felt as though we were being steamrolled. I recall receiving in rapid succession these thick newsprint documents about the size of the local pennysavers that gave “updates” on the development of the standards. They also gave the false impression that there was time for meaningful input into the development of the standards and tests.

I recall attending one such briefing with Sandy and some other colleagues. We were speechless. As we say in education and research, what we were being presented with might have been “reliable” but it certainly was not “valid.” The movers and shakers were politically motivated and ignored decades of educational research that informed better practices. The result has been a largely lost decade of teachers and professors “teaching to the test,” economically challenged districts being further punished, and some educators and administrators fudging or downright cheating on results. Even George W. Bush’s Secretary of Education, Rod Page got caught falsifying test results in Houston, and Michelle Rhee, the former Chancellor of the District of Columbia schools, resigned when over 103 schools – more than half of all D.C. schools – got caught with too many wrong to right erasures on standardized tests. These included eight of the ten schools where Rhee bestowed awards for “high performing educators.”

I recall Sandy and other colleagues being shocked at what we were being fed at the aforementioned session. The running joke was, “If B.S. were rocket fuel we’d be halfway to Uranus.” We had a few laughs that day, but at a subsequent faculty meeting we were told laughing during subsequent meetings and conferences would not be tolerated. This spawned two more greetings or catch phrases: “No Laughing!” and “Whatever you do, don’t laugh.” Poor Sandy, she cracked up every time she heard them.

In those days, you were either on the bus or off it. Everyone had to “collaborate,” and every time we heard that word we thought about the French in WWII. As Charlie Chaplin and Mel Brooks taught us, fascists hate to be laughed at just about more than anything else.

Our colleague, Dr. Margaret Laughlin, “the Mother of Social Studies Education in Wisconsin” taught us to always speak respectfully to administrators and un-collegial colleagues. Still, with her good humor and manners, Sandy Stokes knew how to fight fascists and other un-collegial types. She’d get them laughing, too.

IV.

It seemed that after The Great Laughing Incident of 1996, whenever anyone dared to even suggest “a discouraging word,” they would be threatened with denial of tenure, loss of funding, increased workloads, reams of “bad paper” in their files, or just being put on “the baddy list” as opposed to the “goody list.” The “goodies’ got the gravy train.
A Tribute to Dr. Sandra Stokes

Only Sandy and a few others spoke truth to authority, and she was punished for it time and again. She was brought up on bogus charges with bogus investigations that effectively pinned her down and sent a message to all others who might dare share a dissenting opinion.

In a particularly dark hour, we began asking around to learn the identity of the best labor lawyer in the state. The name Willie Haus kept popping up. We called him and asked, “How much would you want to drive up here from Madison for a day.” You should have seen the look on the administrators’ faces when Willie walked into the meeting. Soon thereafter the charges were dropped, a settlement was reached, and Sandy’s job was saved.

After all she’d been through, Sandy still passionately advocated on behalf of students. When she served on admissions committees, she would be particularly assertive on behalf of those who had earned poor G.P.A.’s when they were younger and then had difficulty gaining acceptance into education programs due to too strict admissions criteria. These returning students faced the almost impossible task of trying to raise 2.0 averages earned when they were say eighteen to 3.5 averages when they were thirty. Sandy often worked to petition and challenge courses and grades. As a result of Sandy’s above and beyond the call efforts, we were rewarded with some of our best teacher candidates.

Her final indignity was being given “the Milton treatment.” In the film Office Space, the boss kept moving Milton’s desk further and further away from the center of operations. The next-to-last time I saw Sandy, she had been removed from the education department building to an office in the student union. Ironically, that now seems appropriate.

When she retired last year, I helped her clean out that office. By this time she already had stage four cancer. I’m convinced her real cause of death was slow murder. Because of her constructive and courageous dissent, she was aggravated, hounded, and hassled to death.

V.

What might be most remarkable about Sandy is what she still managed to accomplish under these conditions. She enthusiastically served as Chair of the Women’s Studies Program. She attended countless promotion and tenure hearings, offering her support and often defending female candidates who ran up against an occasionally difficult old boys’ club. When one such committee member admitted to us that he was being rough on a candidate because he “just wanted to see if could make her cry,” Sandy fought back by enlisting many colleagues from across campus. The tenure candidate was granted a new hearing and later received both tenure and an apology.

Sandy also directed the UWGB Clinical Experiences Program. She fought against favoritism and inconsistency in student placements and made sure students were treated with courtesy and respect during the placement process.

As a committed advocate for childhood literacy, she served as the editor of the Wisconsin State Reading Association Journal. She also worked with the Family Literacy Program of Green Bay, and served as a co-president of the Greater Baylands Reading Council. In 2004, Gov. James Doyle of Wisconsin appointed her to the Wisconsin Council on Physical Disabilities.

Sandy also worked tirelessly on behalf of students from Wisconsin’s First Nations. She served as the University liaison for early childhood education to the College of the Menominee Nation in Kenosha. She designed their program and taught in it for two years in addition to her full-time job at UWGB. She also worked with older, Amerindian high school students, urging them to stay in school. I recall our meeting with one group of students who proudly told us they made more money than we did.

They parked cars at a casino.

Sandy replied, “Governor (Tommy) Thompson wants to take away your casinos.
What are you going to do then?” They went back to their classes. She continued to serve as an advisor for Menominee students who continued their educations at UWGB.

Sandy actively wrote, published, and perhaps most notably, along with Dr. Margaret Laughlin, edited a volume called *Stand! Education* (Houghton-Mifflin). It did not sugarcoat what early career educators could expect to experience in the field. Although currently out-of-print, I still get many requests for the book and some of the articles contained therein.

Sandy and I presented convention sessions on teaching about 9/11 and Columbine. We probably broke some fire laws during the session in Albany for the New York State English Council. I recall doorways filled with faces because all the seats were filled and there was no room left for sitting on the floor. We planned to write some articles or a book on those subjects. Soon thereafter, Sandy took ill.

While doing all this and serving as an inspiration to generations of UWGB students and teachers in the field, Sandy earned her pilot’s license and became quite an accomplished aviatrix. She even became a member of the Ninety-Nines, the international organization of women pilots. Her office was filled with model planes hanging from the ceiling and photographs of Sandy flying various planes. She inspired many others to take to the skies.

**VI.**

Sometimes Sandy and I would trade accounts of our experiences in the schools. Educators ironically, but not altogether inappropriately, call these traded narratives “war stories.”

I remember early on telling Sandy about experiences I had where I attempted to feed students who, as a result of living in poverty, came to school without having had breakfast. It’s more difficult to learn when your stomach is growling. In the richest country in the world this still goes on.

Sandy had had similar experiences in trying to bring food into her classroom. Both of us were ordered by our administrators to stop feeding students, she at the elementary level and I and the secondary long before we became professors.

I stopped, but Sandy found a way. Sandy always found a way. She kept boxes of graham crackers in the back of her classroom. She told her students they were welcome to take a cracker or two whenever they felt their being hungry might be interfering with their learning. She also let them remove a hall pass from the chalk tray whenever a drinking fountain, or as we say in Wisconsin, “the bubbler,” was needed to wash them down.

After she related her compromise solution, I felt as though I had punted on second down. Sandy always seemed to find other ways to do the right thing. She personified Wisconsin the good.

To honor Sandy’s memory, please work to find creative ways to be more tolerant of others and their ideas.

You may also contact your elected officials and others urging them to find more concrete ways to further honor Sandy’s memory. This might include traditional monuments, the naming or re-naming of education sites, or the legislating of safeguards to protect diversity of opinion and those who dissent in our schools. As Pete Seeger has written, “What might be right for one may not be right for another”.

There is no doubt the too early passing of Dr. Sandra Stokes will be felt in Green Bay, the State of Wisconsin, and far beyond.

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