

## Professor Nathan Alexander Remembered

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### **Barbara Patterson**

Nathan always used to stop by the office and our conversations were always very wide and diverse. One afternoon, as we were talking, Nathan came with me to the copy machine that is 30 feet away from the Chancellor's boardroom. I could tell that the Chancellor was having a luncheon and it was a little after 1:00 pm so I knew he and his guests would be getting out soon. To appreciate this story, you must know that I am Catholic, and Nathan began describing how he explained the Eucharist (communion) to his class. For Catholics, we believe the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ. Nathan as he is telling me how he describes this to his classes, begins kinds of dancing and jumping around in the hallway. Nathan is so enthusiastic and energetic in his description, but as a Catholic I was horrified and also laughing at the same time – wondering if this was a near occasion – or actual occasion – of sin. I am also watching the doorway of the Chancellor's boardroom, telling Nathan the Chancellor and his guests might walk out any minute. We escaped without the notice of the Chancellor and his guests!

Nathan and I also served on the committee for the selection of the book the first-year students read. Dean Eleanor Lee would tell us bring three books to the committee meeting that we would like to recommend. Me, being the obedient one, would bring three recommendations, other members would bring five or six, and Nathan would bring a box out of which he would pull 15 to 20 books, the books would keep coming out of the box! He described each in detail: the advantages and disadvantages. I would be the one at the committee meeting telling Nathan – Dean Lee said three not 20!

Lastly, Nathan was so excited to have his daughter in Troy going to Camp Butter and Egg. He took her around to the Troy University offices and introduced her to everyone!

### **Timothy Buckner**

I met Nathan Alexander at the new faculty orientation meeting in 2005. Professor Shaw came by the meeting and said I should keep an eye out for the other new hire in history who had just arrived from Harvard.

I said "Ok, but how will I know which one he is?"

Shaw said, "You'll know."

He was right. I did. [This in no way implies that either I or Professor Shaw believes that all people who went to Harvard look the same.]

I liked Nathan immediately and over the course of the years we were here he became the way that I made sense of Troy, of Alabama, and of the South that I had spent most of my life living within. He thought everything was interesting, and usually, funny. He had terrible luck

with speeding tickets, airlines, mechanics, insurance companies, all things that turn me into a raving lunatic, but things he would shrug off as if they were nothing. Everyone thought that Nathan was with them politically, but if you paid attention, you noticed that he let you talk and he volunteered very little. He was too smart to let anyone pin him down on anything.

He taught me how to take myself less seriously. He taught me to love my job. Once he got sick, he taught me that my petty problems were just that and I learned that I needed to be more like him. I haven't been able to do that yet, but I still try.

### **Joe McCall**

What I remember the most about Nathan is how he reflected what a friend of mine used to call a “study in contrasts.” Nathan would come to work some days dressed in a grey suit, a crisply pressed white shirt, and tie. Later in the afternoon, you might find him wearing the most torn-up sweatshirt and shorts imaginable, sitting in his office discussing a fine point of French history with a few students. In conversations with Nathan, I could always count on him to listen as if what you were saying was the most interesting thing he had ever heard, but he was also willing and ready to debate your point with enthusiasm and respect.

Nathan and I both spent a good deal of time in the Boston area earlier in our lives. Although I had my roots in the South, for Nathan, living in Alabama was a new cultural experience. When I was briefly out of a job at Troy in 2006, I asked Nathan if I could park my old Jeep pickup at his house in the countryside for the five months I'd be abroad on a round-the-world trip. With his usual graciousness, Nathan accepted. I got him to promise to drive it some so he could improve his standing with the locals in his rural neighborhood. His car, which was as often likely to be at the mechanic's shop as on the road, did not work for most of the time I was gone and Nathan became a true “country boy,” driving the back roads of Troy in a rusty old truck and alternately dressed to kill or looking like a mess—adding another dimension to his persona.

Nathan was also fascinated by southern culture after he arrived at Troy. I'd give him four or five books on Alabama history or on southern regionalism and two days later he'd have read them all and would remind or inform me of segments of the book I'd forgotten or never considered. His mind was like a vacuum cleaner, absorbing books and articles with enthusiasm and then moving on to a new room in his incredibly expansive and curious mind. But unlike his study of books or his contemplation of high-minded ideas, Nathan's greatest gift was his love for encounters with people from all walks of life. I could always count on Nathan to reflect, with compassion and intensity, what Walt Whitman reflected on in his poem “Song of the Open Road”:

From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines,  
Going where I list, my own master, total and absolute,

Listening to others, and considering well what they say,  
Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,  
Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me.

I inhale great draughts of space;  
The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine.

I am larger, better than I thought;  
I did not know I held so much goodness.

I miss my friend Nathan and am glad that the *Alexandrian* will remind us of his “goodness” and his intellect.

### **Scout Blum**

My son, Aidan, turned three in August of 2008. A few weeks after his birthday, he got a virus - it didn't seem like anything unusual for a three-year-old in daycare. He was sick over a weekend and seemed a lot better early the next week. The next weekend he was a bit lethargic, and he woke up Sunday morning covered in what looked like red pinpricks. I thought he was having an allergic reaction, so my husband Sean and I got up and took him to the emergency room. When they took blood from his finger, it took forever to stop bleeding. The nurse returned to get a second sample from his arm, and within minutes, a huge black bruise, covering the entire midsection of his arm, appeared. Our doctor came by and told us that Aidan's platelet count (the part of the blood that helps clotting), which should have been around 150,000, was literally 0. They started talking about leukemia and any type of injury being life threatening, as we bundled him up and took an ambulance ride to Children's Hospital in Birmingham. Aidan stayed in the hospital for three days, received a platelet transfusion, and made a full recovery within a few days. Our pediatrician said she had never seen someone bounce back so fast. I have never felt so helpless in my life.

I posted something on Facebook, and Nathan responded almost immediately. I had known at that point that he had been ill, but really didn't know the details. He was so kind and understanding and was there to explain a lot of the blood results - since he had so much experience with that. He was rather quick to tell us that, since the rest of Aidan's blood work was normal, it was unlikely he had leukemia. We emailed back and forth and talked when I got back to school. Even in the midst of sickness himself, Nathan was able to use his experience to help me feel better. He was a generous soul, and when I think about that time in the hospital, I remember the friendship he showed me and my family, rather than the fear and worry of being a parent of a sick child. Thank you, Nathan! Miss you very much!

### **Bryant P. Shaw**

My favorite memory of Nathan Alexander is a conversation we had soon after his arrival at Troy. We talked of our families. Speaking of his young daughter, Elisa, he noted how much he loved reading with her. I was confused because earlier Nathan had mentioned that Elisa lived in Massachusetts. No problem, replied Nathan. Each evening they fixed a special time to read to each other over the phone--Elisa reading one part of a book, Nathan the next.

This sticks with me for what it says both about Nathan personally and about his sense of his profession. Regardless of circumstance, he was consistently positive—"resilient" is the word a mutual friend might use. He loved learners and learning. He knew teachers were life-long learners. Above all, he reveled in the joy of learning and always made time for sharing it.

So, when I think about teaching and learning, I think of Nathan and Elisa and their evening phone reads to each other, learning together and loving every minute of it.

### **Allen and Patty Jones**

**Allen:** The last Harvard graduate to work in Troy's history department was my predecessor, a medievalist who stuck it out for a single semester before bolting. I remember wrestling with this fact as I sat on my back porch, pouring over candidates' files while looking to fill the position for a new historian. The best candidate was a fellow from Harvard, and I recall finally convincing myself to throw caution to the wind: "What's to say another guy from Harvard won't like Troy." So we hired Nathan. And I was wrong. He didn't like Troy; rather, he flat out loved it! Nathan embraced this town like no other. Of course, he delighted in talking about all manner of academic topics with scholars from a variety of disciplines. But also, he played basketball with students, and he went fishing with his barber, Raymond! But as Patty and I came to understand, Nathan's fondness for Troy arose from something bigger, a love for life.

**Patty:** The day after Nathan passed away, I overheard a well-meaning professor say of Nathan, "He was young in his academic career. He had such potential. It is really tragic." I know that he didn't mean for it to be callous but reducing the death of Nathan Alexander to merely a loss of academic potential really bothered me because Nathan was a person whom I felt privileged to know, and not just because he was the most prolific reader that I have ever met. I've spent most of my adult life around professional academics, but Nathan was unique. He exhibited a profound enthusiasm for life and everything in it that continually amazed me. Instead of belittling and mocking this small town, as even the locals do incessantly, he thought that Troy, Alabama was absolutely amazing, from the brightness of the stars in the sky, (that he couldn't see in Boston), to the wall of deer at Raymond's barbershop. Even surgery didn't get him down! When Nathan had a dangerous growth removed from his scalp, he delighted students, colleagues, and friends

by donning a variety of headgear: a “young and hip” do-rag, a variety of baseball caps, and a yarmulke.

I miss hearing him tell me what books he and Elisa were reading together nightly over the telephone. I miss his Pollyanna, “I’ve found a reason for being glad,” outlook on life. I miss seeing Troy through his eyes. I am honored to have known him, and I am sad that he had to leave so soon.