

Comments by J. Laurie Snell at memorial service for Reese T. Prosser

Thinking about fitting a description of Reese as a mathematician into a musical celebration of his life made me realize how similar his approach was to these two great loves of his life.

When Reese sat down with his cello and looked out at the audience, you saw a confident smile (so beautifully shown in the picture of Reese in your program) and, as he played, you had the feeling that he was simply releasing the beauty of the music for our pleasure.

A mathematics class or a seminar talk by Reese was no different. It was a performance. He started with the same confident smile and weaved his mathematical tale as if he were just a story teller. His apparent effortless performance seemed to minimize his own contribution.

Whether Reese was playing in Hopkins Center or at home with friends or even in an old barn he performed the same way, smile and all. This was also true for mathematics. He would give just as polished a performance talking to you in his office as he would to a class of 100 students or a large seminar. We often wondered how Reese could give such flawless explanations often on the spur of the moment.

Of course, the natural explanation was that he had explained this topic many times in the past. The only problem with this explanation is that when asked to explain a mathematical topic that was way outside any of his own mathematical interests Reese happily agreed and gave the same fine performance.

When you asked Reese how he knew a subject he had no right to know, he would smile and say "that's from my secret past."

Here is a small example of this. When we needed a croupier for our annual chance fair Reese dusted off his top hat and performed as our croupier raking in the chips and paying out the winnings for the complicated set of bets without a mistake just as though he had been doing this all his life. When in his secret past was Reese a croupier?

Of course most of us never saw the performances Reese enjoyed the most. These occurred when he directed a house full of children, grandchildren and dogs on a typical Christmas holiday or weekend on the cape. I bet even the long sailing trips Reese took every, summer with Nancy were performances.

It is hard to imagine the mathematics department without Reese. Who will teach the course that no-one else can teach? Who will make the new faculty feel at home in the department? Who will be social chairman and continue the tradition of "semi-lavish spreads". Who will take on the graduate students who want to do their own thing? Who

will help the young turks like the wavelet group get outside support to allow their research to flourish? Who will give the department seminar when the invited speaker cancels the last minute? Who will be our croupier?

Fortunately. Reese showed the department that all these things can be done and as we see from the musical celebration today his good spirit will live on and assure that what he started will continue though perhaps not as effortlessly and with the same charm.

I have tried to say how I think of Reese but our former colleague Craig Tracy put it much simpler when he wrote: Reese was a great and kind man.