

TOWN OF SPENCER MOURNS THE LOSS OF A BELOVED TEACHER



Philip Delongchamp

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SPENCER - For 20 years there were sweet notes to parents, coupons for a free lunch and birthday cards for the thousands of students who passed through his classroom.

But when students at David Prouty High School returned Wednesday after a snow day, word began to spread a beloved teacher, Philip Delongchamp, had died unexpectedly.

“He was the greatest teacher in the district,” former superintendent Ralph Hicks said. “He had a very special way with kids. He could connect with them, even the ones who were tough to reach; he could reach them.”

Mr. Delongchamp suffered a sudden medical problem early Tuesday morning and was rushed to UMass Memorial Medical Center - University Campus in Worcester, where he died a short time later.

If it's possible for a person to die from a broken heart, it may have been just such a malady that took Mr. Delongchamp, who was grieving the loss of his mother after her death in September, his brother Gerard Delongchamp said. Their father had died nearly a decade ago, and Philip, who lived his whole life in the family home in Spencer, became her devoted caretaker.

When she could no longer stay at home, Philip visited her daily - missing maybe one or two days because of bad weather - at the Jewish Healthcare Center in Worcester. If there were storms, he'd check into a hotel in the city so he could be close by, and after she passed he continued to visit the other residents there who'd come to consider him family, his brother said.

Philip had recently begun going through his mother's belongings and was planning to sell the house. That process was hitting him hard, Gerard said, adding that he is comforted by his knowledge that his brother and parents are now reunited and watching over him and his family.

On social media and in the natural world, it is nearly impossible to find anyone who would say an unkind word about the devoted 64-year-old teacher.

Both of state Rep. Donald R. Berthiaume Jr.'s sons had “Mr. D,” as he was known.

“He was the best guy ever,” Mr. Berthiaume said. “He was an example of how teachers should be,” he said, adding that his younger son, Nicholas, scored well on a test and Mr. Delongchamp sent home a nice note along with a free lunch coupon.

“If all teachers were like him, our educational system would be awesome,” Mr. Berthiaume said.

There were some things Mr. Delongchamp did for his charges that they may never have known about. Mr. Hicks said he wouldn't be surprised if half his paycheck was spent on things chosen especially to make each student feel special.

And he knew each of their birthdays, acknowledging those with cards and tokens. He did the same for his colleagues. And outside of class, he prayed for his pupils and co-workers in church, and he said a special prayer for them on their birthdays, his brother said.

He was a devout Catholic who'd settled in a few years ago at St. Anne-St. Patrick Parish in Sturbridge after the church he attended in Spencer was demolished and the parish combined with another.

When news of his death reached them, some students almost immediately started a petition to rename Knox Trail Middle School where he taught for many years before returning to the high school for the current school year.

“While Gen. Knox's brave journey passing through our town is certainly a monumental piece of our history, Phillip Delongchamp has impacted the lives of countless students in his 43 years as an educator and drastically increased the quality of education provided by (the Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District) in his years here,” the petition reads. “Mr. D is the greatest educator that has ever graced the halls of our town's schools, and to not perpetuate his legacy would be shameful.”

Nearly 3,000 people had signed the petition in less than 24 hours.

Others talked about how they'd been inspired to teach because of their experiences in Mr. Delongchamp's class or how he cared about each one of them passionately. In 2009 he won a [Teacher of the Year Award](#)

from Walmart.

“Teaching and family were the two things he cared most about,” Mr. Hicks said.

One of his students, Carter Bemis, learned of Mr. Delongchamp’s death as the snowstorm was raging Tuesday, and he recalled in a Facebook post how his teacher had mentioned that alongside the names of his parents, his own name was etched into a gravestone.

“I grabbed a shovel and walked across town in this storm (which I’m pretty sure has something to do with you, giving your students one last snow day on your way out) and I shoveled out your family’s plot,” Mr. Bemis wrote. “We had promised to have another one of our lunches together soon, and I had every intention of following through on that promise.”

The post includes a short video in which Mr. Bemis lays down a pizza box and reveals two slices inside. One for him and one for “the greatest man I’ve ever known.”