DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
JOHN MEYER SLATIN

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for John Meyer Slatin, professor, rhetoric and writing, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
JOHN MEYER SLATIN

John Meyer Slatin, beloved colleague and friend, died far too soon. At 55 he was at the height of his powers, a pioneer and world leader in making the internet accessible to people with disabilities, living proof of the adage that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. He suffered from retinitis pigmentosa, which caused the gradual deterioration and ultimate loss of his vision. In one of those ironies of which English professors are so fond, his painful struggle to come to terms with his disability led directly to his brilliant career.

John was the son of Myles Slatin, an English professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and the artist, Diana Bluestein Slatin. He was born in Buffalo in 1952, and grew up there as a faculty brat, acquiring a lifelong love of literature, art, and music. He received his B.A. from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and his doctorate from Johns Hopkins, where he wrote his dissertation on the poetry of Marianne Moore. He taught at Middlebury College in Vermont for a year before accepting his position in the English department at UT Austin in 1979.

The tiny mug shot in his department file shows a sweet, skinny, serious, slightly balding, but incredibly young looking man: this was the John that so many of his peer group in the department came to know and love.

When he arrived in Austin, he could still get around without a cane, and read fairly easily, but the darkness was gathering fast: he had little peripheral vision left. Those were the days before ubiquitous audio books or computers that read text aloud, and we all wondered how a scholar of poetry and grader of student papers would be able to negotiate the rest of his academic career. As John struggled with what he considered the physical indignity of learning to use a cane, and learned to express and control his anger about his disease, we reflected, being English professors, on Milton’s famous sonnet on his blindness. Milton begins on a note of furious indignation:

When I consider how my light is spent
E’re half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodg’d with me use less... (“On His Blindness”)

We wondered, and John wondered too, whether his “Talent” for language and writing would be rendered “useless” by his disability. Milton’s sonnet ends on a note of resignation, as Patience tells the angry speaker that there are many ways of being useful to God: “‘They also serve who only stand and waite.’” But Milton clearly wasn’t resigned, since he went on to write Paradise Lost, and nor was John. He didn’t stand and wait, he stood up and was counted. Although he never ceased to love poetry, and went on to publish his book on Marianne Moore, The Savage's Romance (Penn State UP, 1986), his interests turned first to the representations of blindness in literature, and then to ways in which he, and other visually or physically impaired people, could surmount their disabilities.

In a fortunate temporal coincidence, John’s increasing blindness coincided with the PC and internet revolution. John was what is called an “early adopter,” one of the first to see how the new technologies that have transformed our communication and information practices could enable people like him to be leaders in their chosen fields. He was the first director of the innovative Computer Writing and Research Lab in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing, and subsequently director of UT’s Accessibility Institute. He traveled internationally to spread the gospel of opening the internet to people with disabilities. He was consistently featured as a keynote speaker at conferences on accessible web design and co-authored Maximum Accessibility, a leading text on the
subject, with Sharron Rush. In 2007, he served as co-chair of the Worldwide Web Consortium (W3C) on Accessible Design, leading an international committee of experts in drafting standards that could be implemented by designers in any language for people with vision, hearing, mobility, and other impairments.

Despite his blindness, John lived an extraordinarily full and rich life. No account of it would be complete without a tribute to the selfless devotion of his wife Anna, herself a successful entrepreneur and CEO of her own company. John loved travel, and Anna made beautiful places like Paris and Barcelona vivid to him after he could no longer see them. Their accounts of their travels were full of seductive descriptions of food, drink, sounds, and smells. Every International Accessibility conference was also a chance to experience new countries, as well as new cuisines and new wines. As his visual life contracted, John’s musical life expanded. He and Anna danced frequently with Austin Body Choir, an improvisational world music dance group held at the Austin Yoga School. The members of this group offered him another world, where sound, motion, and touch were paramount. During his illness they provided him with astounding levels of comfort and practical support.

After Anna, the creature nearest to his heart was John’s guide dog, Dillon, who served him faithfully for years, and who died from cancer shortly after his master did. John never loved his cane, but he came to love and depend on Dillon, who gave him a new lease of physical life and energy. Remarkably, John and Dillon participated in a dance called “Sextet” created by choreographer Allison Orr, which featured two professional dancers, two blind people and their guide dogs, and was performed at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. in 2006.

In the summer of 2005, John was diagnosed with leukemia; on March 24, 2008, after courageously enduring radiation therapy, chemotherapy, and a bone marrow transplant, he died at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Along with Anna, John is survived by his children, Mason and Ledia, and his grandchild, Wolf, all of San Francisco; his father, Myles, of Buffalo; and his brother, Peter, of Manhattan.

The arc of John’s career stretched from the formal poetry of language, through the practical poetry of committed activism, to the prose poetry of the internet blog, *The Leukemia Letters*, on which he and his devoted wife Anna chronicled, often with devastating immediacy, the long, slow process of his treatment and his dying. His joint appointment in the Departments of English and Rhetoric and Writing aptly symbolized and contained the balance between poetics and persuasion. His talent for language was not “lodged with me useless” but exploited fully in his life as an academic, a teacher, and an advocate. His first love, Marianne Moore, wrote that despite the apparent irrelevancy of poetry, it has a practical function:

> I too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
> Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that there is in it after all, a place for the genuine.
> Hands that can grasp, eyes
> that can dilate, hair that can rise
> if it must, these things are important not because a high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful. (‘On Poetry’)

John’s life incarnated the poetry of the useful. Although we, his colleagues, are indignant that he should have suffered two such mortal blows as blindness and leukemia, we are amazed at the courage and grace with which he turned potential defeat into creative triumph, and we are grateful to have shared his journey.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Elizabeth Cullingford (chair), Evan B. Carton, and Kurt O. Heinzelman.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the executive vice president and provost, and the president April 29, 2009. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: [http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/](http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/).