

English cuts, 'Romance 101' and Colonel By campus

By Ruthanne Urquhart
Algonquin Times staff

Romance has never been in any Algonquin College program brochure, and it certainly isn't a recognized benefit in labor negotiations, but sometimes —

"I met my wife at Colonel By (campus)," says Richard Martin, Co-ordinator of social science & languages. "She started teaching there, in études familiales (family studies). We were introduced at a Christmas party in 1983, by a mutual friend. We had a nice evening together at the party, and then she went her way and I went mine. And then, in the fall, I had a ticket to the ballet or something, and I couldn't go, so I asked that mutual friend if she knew someone who could go. She said, 'Well, how about Huguette (Van Bergen)?' And so we sort of made acquaintance again."

Sounds fairly traditional — a mutual friend, a Christmas party.

"But what's really romantic about this story," says Martin, "is that we actually got to know each other on the picket line during the strike of 1984.

"She was doing the same shift as I was... and since we had been introduced, we started talking, and talking — and all the time walking up and down with our 'On Strike' signs draped over our bodies. Of course romance was in the air. No wonder."

Martin started teaching technical writing part-time at Rideau campus in 1972, and moved to Colonel By four years later. He remembers the campus fondly.

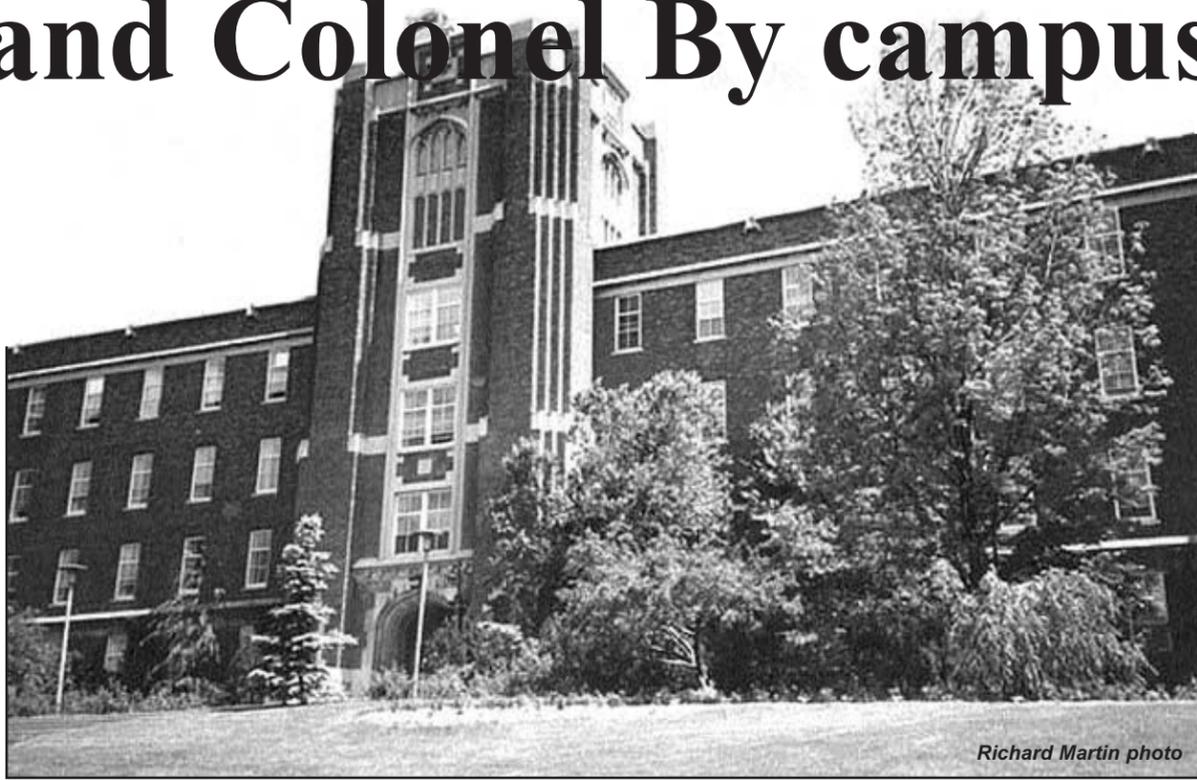
"It was always small and intimate," he says. "The horticulture students worked on the grounds. As part of their projects they would work on different parts of the campus, and by the time we were shut down, it was a gorgeous campus horticulturally."

Out of sight...

Colonel By campus had another selling point, according to Martin.

"One of the great things about being in the east end of town, and especially at Colonel By, was that you were insulated from all the politics at the Woodroffe campus — things filtering down from the Fifth Floor, who's in and who's out, who's made a deal with so-and-so. It's always part of any organization, and you have to be aware of that, but you could ignore all of that at Colonel By. And Rideau (campus) was like that, too, in the sense that it was its own little world."

Colonel By campus underwent re-novations in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but the old buildings, with their twelve-foot ceilings and huge windows, were hard to heat and impossible to make economical. In 1991, Algonquin launched a plan to consolidate campuses and services college-



Richard Martin photo

Colonel By Campus 1992

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wide, but not without some false starts.

Some programs were moved to Champlain campus, an old high school on Lanark Avenue, but a problem with asbestos insulation forced a mid-year shift to Meadowlands campus, a rented office building at the corner of Meadowlands Avenue and Prince of Wales Drive.

"They closed the Heron Park campus," remembers Martin, "and put the building on the market. It sat and sat, and there were rumors that there was industrial waste in the ground, and nobody would buy it. So, after a year, they re-opened it and everybody moved back.

"Last year, they found that there was, in fact, room at Woodroffe campus, so they moved everybody over here. The (Heron Park) campus is still, I guess, empty and on the market."

Martin has taught at several of Algonquin's campuses over the years. His department is different from most, though, because English is a cross-college requirement, and while nobody graduates with an English diploma, everybody must take at least two semesters of English.

"At Colonel By, I was teaching (English to) architecture students," he says. "One year, in first semester, I wanted them to do an oral presentation ... on something they'd been doing in one of their classes. I ended up getting lots of presentations on two-point perspectives."

Martin was so impressed by the drawings in the presentations that he had trou-

ble concentrating on evaluating the overall presentations. Moreover, he came to understand that teaching English on a cross-college basis could be distancing for the instructors.

"I realized that there was a whole dimension to these students that I didn't know anything about. All I saw was that a lot of them couldn't write a sentence, or develop a paragraph ... it taught me that there were many other facets to them — their abilities and personalities."

Martin talks about the many cuts across the college with an understandable lack of enthusiasm.

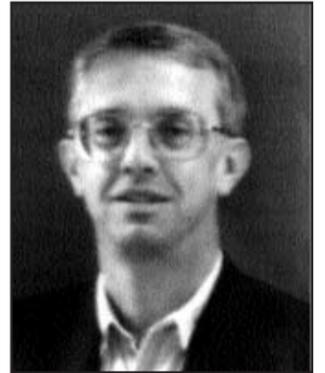
"The cliché is that we have to do more with less," he says. "The truth is — you get what you pay for, and if there's less money, you get less instruction."

And in the English department, that's meant a cut of 50 per cent or more in hours of instruction per semester.

"For the students who are strong, it's okay," says Martin. "But when you cut back on the hours, you disadvantage the students who need a little bit more time, more work. And it's not just in English that that's true."

Opinion holds that students at today's colleges are generally less proficient in English than were students in years gone by, but Martin disagrees.

"Despite the rumors about proficiency, I find the students are pretty good when you compare them to the past. There was a provincial policy years ago ... that was



Richard Martin
1997

strictly 'first come, first served.' There couldn't be any testing of applicants, and so, during that period, we had people who were, in truth, illiterate. And I don't throw that word around,

because it's a very subjective term."

Now there is English proficiency testing for all students, and many aren't happy that they are required to take two English courses — one generic, one program-specific — as part of their programs. Martin encounters that unhappiness when his English assignments run up against other course assignments.

"They'll say to me — they don't mean it in any kind of insulting way — but they'll say, 'Please understand that English is at the bottom of my list.'"

As a long-time educator and administrator, Martin understands the reasons for cutbacks and streamlining, but when it comes to English, he'd like to see a change in attitude.

"People pay lip-service to the idea that English is important, but when it comes down to the crunch, they cut English."

Cutbacks notwithstanding, Martin knows that the quality and workplace-relevance of a college-level education in Ontario are high.

"What's happening at Algonquin is that a lot of people have been to university and have their degrees, and can't get a job, so they come here for two years and get the applied training. We have a lot of those students in the museum program, for example. They have history degrees, and a good practical application of a history degree is to work in a museum ... so they come here to get the practical application of their history degrees."

Passionate arguments

There is one change that Martin has seen take place college-wide in the English department —

"We're middle-aged now," he says ruefully. "We used to take things very seriously in the English department. I was present at an event when two faculty members got into a dispute. One of them picked up a chair and seemed to be about to hurl it at the other, crying out, 'Ah, you've got shit for brains!' But we've slowed down. The days of passionate arguments are over."

Maybe so, but as long as Martin is on board, remembering such evenings, Algonquin's English department won't ever be thought too dull or proper.

"There are lots of interesting stories to tell," he says with a grin. "None of which I wish to tell."