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Colleagues gather to mourn HSU's Rofes

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ARCATA — Scholar. Activist. Friend.

Eric Rofes, associate professor of education at Humboldt State University, was remembered as all of these Friday afternoon. HSU colleagues and community members spoke at a memorial for Rofes, who died June 26 at age 51.

Rofes was the founder of the North Coast Education Summit, the annual education conference at HSU, and was known nationally as a gay activist.

"He was a tireless, passionate activist and he believed fiercely in the democratic process," said teacher Nora Wynne.

She recalled a class in which Rofes "rejoiced" when a student forced him to question his own assumptions and change his views.

"He understood that we were always learning and always evolving, and he modeled that for us," Wynne said.

Crispin Hollings, Rofes' partner of 16 years, said that after Rofes' death he found a book review circled, with the word "Get" next to it, an indication of Rofes' desire to keep learning new things.

"HSU was a place where Eric could tap into his creativity.... Eric got so much joy in interacting with students and educators," Hollings said.

Michael Weiss of Queer Humboldt said he met Rofes three years ago, when Weiss first moved to Humboldt County. He said he knew Rofes as a friend and had no idea at first of Rofes' national reputation. **The author or editor of 12 books on topics ranging from charter schools to gay men's identity post-AIDS, Rofes was also a board member of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.** Immediately following his death, stories about his life appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, Los Angeles Times and New York Times.

Weiss recalled idly thinking that his new friend should spread his ideas beyond Humboldt County.

"Little did I know," he said.

Despite that national reputation, Rofes had a great "humanity" and eagerness to encourage others to share their own voices, said HSU Professor Christina Accomando.

"One of the things he did best was bring people together," Accomando said.

Susan Higgins, dean of HSU's College of Professional Studies, quoted Rofes as saying schools are "the sole remaining public institutions" capable of transforming democracy.

Higgins said "two minutes" after she started at the job Rofes was in her office, demanding to know her thoughts on a variety of issues and encouraging her to speak at a colloquium he was organizing. She said he brought an intense energy and "a great intellect" to HSU.

Education Professor Ann Diver-Stamnes also recalled Rofes' Converse sneakers in a variety of colors and his "wonderful goofiness."

"It is rare to find someone who makes us think and laugh in equal measure," she said.

Sheila Rocker Heppe, also an education professor, recalled how Rofes -ever the activist -- once picketed the halls of HSU's Harry Griffith Hall to protest the premature removal of his lunch from the staff microwave.

Education Professor Patty Yancey said she and Rofes attended graduate school together at the University of California, Berkeley, and it was through him that she came to HSU. Yancey said they worked together in a "familial" setting, where one moment might bring conflict and the next "we'd be in the corner giggling."

"He was just such an incredible force," Yancey said.

HSU President Rollin Richmond recalled Rofes' work as co-chairman of the university's Diversity Plan Action Committee. Richmond said Rofes was dedicated to creating real change in diversity at HSU.

"He was very smart, but he was also savvy about how to approach issues that have strong political overtones," Richmond said. "Finally, I think he cared a lot about his students."

Todd Larsen, Weiss' partner, said Rofes was particularly proud of helping create the Multicultural Queer Studies minor at HSU. Larsen said Rofes helped him connect with and strengthen the local gay and lesbian community.

"He was a great connector," Larsen said. "He connected us with wonderful people."

In keeping with that ability to make connections, the memorial organizers encouraged attendees to write their name and an interest on the back of one of Rofes' business cards, then pass the card on to a stranger in order to make a new friend.

"Working with him reminded us that you stick it out for the long haul and you learn how to work with people who are different from yourself," Accomando said.

At the memorial it was announced that the North Coast Education Summit will continue, in combination with a diversity conference hosted by the HSU MultiCultural Center. It's scheduled for March.

The memorial program encouraged people to continue working for change, and included a quote from Rofes:

"I want to be a voice affirming the value and heroism of long-term commitment to democratic processes of community organizing. We may hate the endless meetings, be sick of licking envelopes, feel frustrated working across different identities and political visions, and be drained by community cannibalism, but we've got to continue doing the work."