

In Memoriam Charles Berst

By Henry Ansgar Kelly (Emeritus Distinguished Research Professor)

Charles Berst, fondly known to all as Chuck, a much-admired member of the UCLA English Department since 1967, passed away peacefully on September 28, 2019, just two days short of his birthday, when he would have attained to the historic age of fourscore and seven years.

Charles Ashton Berst was born in Seattle, Washington, on September 30, 1932. He attended Leschi Elementary School, and, among other notable achievements there, he won the Dead Man's Float competition for eight-year-olds by a full minute. On to Marshall Junior High School, where he ran the school print shop. At Roosevelt High he fostered his life-long flair for the histrionic and the bureaucratic, participating in drama productions and student-body government. Immediately upon graduation he vaulted into the Merchant Marines with the rank of Chief Petty Officer on a vessel making repeated visits to Japan; not a bad summer job for a kid just out of high school.

In the fall of 1949, Chuck started at the University of Washington, but in the middle of his sophomore year, his father died at the age of fifty, from complications connected with Marfan Syndrome, a genetic disorder of the connective tissue, which Chuck inherited and would battle all his life. Chuck made the difficult, even heroic, decision to leave his beloved studies to work to support his widowed mother. He gathered together whatever resources he could and started to acquire rental property. After a few successful years as a real-estate entrepreneur he celebrated the newly acquired family stability and took his mother on a five-month tour of Europe. At that time he started what could have become a second business, of importing VW Beetles into America. The first acquisition, used on the tour, was shipped to New York and driven across the country to Seattle during the wintry November of 1957, to become his mother's permanent conveyance.

Thereupon, while continuing with the business, Chuck resumed his studies. He stayed on at Washington after graduation and entered the Ph.D. program, and, after finishing his course-work in 1962, further broadened his cultural, intellectual, and romantic horizons by marrying a scientist newly emigrated from The Netherlands. She was a medical technologist and researcher whose background and tenacity would prove invaluable in deftly navigating Chuck's Marfan symptoms. She also had an exceptional genius in the science of Home Economics, a gene that Chuck was short on, which served him and their two daughters exceedingly well.

Their European honeymoon produced a second Beetle, shipped directly to Seattle (correcting the mistake made with his first import). It remained Chuck's signature vehicle for the next fifty-two years, faithfully ascending from UCLA to his home on the Mulholland ridge of the Santa Monica Mountains and descending back again, almost daily, until it was retired in 2014, when Chuck was relieved of driving because of his failing eyesight. Business-minded as he was, he calculated the savings that his continued

use of it had provided him, calling it his million-dollar car.

Chuck completed his doctorate in 1965, and took a job at the university of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. Then he was recruited to the UCLA English Department and arrived, as one of six new assistant professors, in the fall of 1967. This was a time of great growth for the department, and, by 1969, when UCLA was celebrating its fiftieth year of existence, there were forty-five assistant professors of English. We were housed in the Humanities Building, later named Rolfe Hall after Franklin Rolfe, former chair of English and then dean of the college, who, according to report, was responsible for the diminutive size of the HB offices: they were to be so small that there could be no question of sharing them. But, sure enough, when the 1967 contingent arrived, they were allotted a total of three offices on the ground floor of the building. Chuck's partner in his office was Ed Condren, a Right-Stuff-level naval aviator who had seen the light and become a medievalist. But later in that year, half of the fourth floor opened up, and, after losing a coin toss, Chuck gathered his possessions and made his way up three floors to an office opposite that of Andy Kelly (author of this memoir), another member of the '67 cohort, another loser of the toss. Chuck stayed there for the duration, until the whole department decamped and opened up in the newly named second Humanities Building, formerly Kinsey Hall (the original Physics and Biology Building of 1929), rehabilitated after the 1994 earthquake.

The chief academic interests of Charles Berst centered around the dramatic productions of George Bernard Shaw. From the beginning he was struck by fact that Shaw's stage plays were lauded *in globo*, but not as individual works of art. In his landmark book, *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Drama*, which was published in 1973 by the University of Illinois Press, he presented a meticulous analysis of ten of Shaw's dramas, showing exactly where the artistic quality lay, both literary (poetic) and dramatic, unearthing hitherto unrealized features of their make-up. He made many of the dramatic virtues of the plays part of his own pedagogic style, and, especially in the large survey courses that were his forte, he became a literal one-man drama.

As a side-note in this regard, I may note that Chuck and his family were very active in the Marfan Foundation, dedicated to bringing the disorder to the attention of the general public, in order to effect early diagnoses that could anticipate and pre-empt many of the debilitating effects that might otherwise occur. Chuck was used as one of the living examples of the condition by Dr. Steve Cederbaum in the UCLA Medical School, an expert in the area. However, when Chuck appeared in the classroom, even though the script called only for a minor role, Exhibit B or C, he invariably took over the field and stole the show. The end product, however, was very entertaining and, as a result, highly educational. Not surprisingly, Chuck was the recipient of the UCLA Distinguished Teaching Award.

Another interest of Chuck's was religion. He himself was greatly influenced by the Theosophist movement started by Madame Blavatsky in 1875. Theosophy had a strong presence in Seattle when Chuck was growing up, and he actively participated in it. This interest, joined to his field of Shavian studies, was the inspiration for his book, *Shaw*

and Religion, published by Penn in 1981. In his own contribution on “The Poetic Genesis of Shaw’s God,” he stressed that Shaw’s experience of religion was largely based on esthetics, which played a far larger role than philosophy, let alone theology, in his dramatic presentations. Later on, Chuck returned in greater depth to Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, which he had dissected in his earlier book under the rubric of “A Potboiler as Art,” and he produced a whole book on it: *Pygmalion: Shaw’s Spin on Myth and Cinderella* (Twayne, 1995).

In 1984, in the midst of the Olympic Games in Los Angeles, the condition named for the pediatrician Dr. Antoine Marfan almost caught up with Chuck at about the same age as it did his father. But he and his expert medics cannily side-stepped it. Some warning signs brought him to the operating table, and an aortic aneurysm was nipped in the bud and a few coronary arteries swapped out. He recovered well, but felt that his days were numbered. He was right, of course, but the number was significantly higher than expected: more than thirty-five years’ worth of days, in fact.

One unwelcome result of his new health regime was that he had to give up his pipe, the fumes of which he used to rely on, especially in his Rolfe Hall office, for scholarly inspiration. (This was some years before we all had to give up our pipes and other tobacco carriers.) However, this deprivation, or a combination of associated factors, had a profound positive effect on him, stimulating a new interest in the nuts and bolts of running of the university. He became an absolute master of the committee and the committee report, at departmental, college, and university levels. He served as Chair of the Faculty of the College of Letters and Science, and in due course, he chaired the entire Academic Senate (in 1988-89), and was the recipient of a University Service Award. His most masterful production in the committee-report genre concerned the many Academic Senate committees he had to deal with. He immediately saw that their formation, rationale, and workings were chaotic. He wrote a systematic program for all of them, which was incorporated into the local Academic Senate Manual as Appendix XV. It became celebrated far and wide as the “Berst Appendix.”

In the 1990s, in a misguided effort to save money, the UC administration came up with a device meant to cull out the top professors in departments “before their time,” by tempting them with golden parachutes. The program went by the acronym of VERIP, which meant something like “Very Early Rest In Peace.” The third such offering, in 1993, was especially successful, and in our English Department alone eleven professors were prematurely shelved, including Chuck. But in typical Chuck-like fashion, he considered his new status as emeritus professor a challenge: he had to do something about it! He became a pillar of the Emeriti Association, and began a crusade for the recognition of the continued value and contributions of so-called retired professors, as still members of their respective departments and voting members of their local Academic Senates. He spread his enthusiasm to other campuses of the university, serving as the UCLA representative to the Council of UC Emeriti Associations. He was particularly concerned to bring their continued research work, teaching, scholarly production, and professional service to the attention of all.

This crusade resulted in the successive issues of the *UC Emeriti Bibliographic Survey*, which Chuck laboriously and meticulously compiled and edited. This project was carried on by his collaborator and successor, John Vohs of UC Davis, in the significantly re-named bulletins, *A Virtual Eleventh Campus: An Inventory of University of California Emeriti Activity*. Partly as a recognition of Chuck's efforts, UCLA and other UC campuses have instituted the working title of "Research Professor" for those who apply for it, to substitute for "Professor Emeritus." The latter word, "emeritus," coming from Latin *ex* and *meritus*, and originally meaning "honorably discharged," seems to be sometimes understood as "no longer meritorious" or "deservedly out of here." Chuck worked to give the title renewed luster, signifying "extra-deserving."

Another major effort on Chuck's part was his service on the committee to find facilities of assisted living for UCLA emeriti and retirees, and his experience in real-estate matters proved to be invaluable in finally coming up with a solution: Belmont Village on Wilshire Boulevard. Chuck also served on the Board of Governors of the Faculty Center, and was prominent among those who worked hard to preserve and improve and support it. That, in fact, could stand the motto for his whole career: To Preserve, Improve, and Support. His was a life of principle, well lived.