

TRIBUTE

Joseph Platt '37: 'Soul of Harvey Mudd College'

I first met Joseph Platt in 1957, when I was a college senior and he was in his first year as founding president of Harvey Mudd College. Joe had grown up in Rochester, and had arrived in Claremont, Calif., after a stint teaching in Rochester's physics department, from which he'd graduated with honors in 1937, and where, as a faculty member, he'd helped design and build a 240-million-volt synchrocyclotron.

In 1961, as I was finishing my doctorate, he recruited me to join the new college's physics department. Joe was a charming and compelling recruiter; we met outdoors, me in a chair and he sitting on a wall, curling his legs up under him, stoking his pipe and talking about his dreams for a great college. How could I not want to join?

Joe would spend more than half his life actively involved in the life of "HMC." President for 20 years, he became a senior professor in the physics department in 1981,

and continued to teach until just a few years before his death in July at age 96.

It always seemed to me that Joe and his wife, Jean, provided half the vision of the college. The other half was provided by the Mudds and their friends. Both halves were essential to HMC.

Four aspects of Joe's personality stand out especially vividly to me, all of them contributing to the legacy of the college.

The first was integrity. You knew where Joe stood, and he never disappointed. An example: In the early days the faculty debated what qualities we were looking for in our

students. One faculty member suggested that to learn something about them, we tell potential students one thing but actually do something else. Another faculty member said he didn't think that was smart. Joe said that it wasn't only not smart, but it wasn't right. That settled that.

The second was teamwork. Everyone—faculty, students, alumni, staff, trustees—

was part of the team. An example: In the 1960s, while other campuses were storming administration buildings to protest the Vietnam War, some students organized their own protest. And who was the first person they asked to speak to them? Joe, of course.

The third was quality. An example: Joe traveled the country recruiting the best founding faculty he could. When Joe began his role as president, there were seven faculty members. By the time he stepped down as president in 1976, the college had become among the best undergraduate engineering programs in the country.

The fourth was fun. Joe had a sense of play. An example was his guitar playing and singing Art Roberts songs, at places like the East Dorm Christmas Party: "When Rabi was a young man..."; "Round and round and round go the deuterons..." Nobody was left out; we all came in on the choruses.

Joe was, and is, the soul of Harvey Mudd College.

—Thomas Helliwell



LEADER: Platt combined fun and drive as founding president of Harvey Mudd College.

Helliwell is a professor emeritus of physics at Harvey Mudd College. This essay is adapted from his remembrances at Harvey Mudd College's "Remembering Joe Platt," <http://newwww.hmc.edu/rememberingjoeplatt>. Reprinted with permission.

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