

Obituaries

ROBERT JOSEPH CORMIER

ROBERT J. CORMIER, teacher and director of social studies at Shrewsbury (Massachusetts) High School, died in his home on October 30, 1993, at the age of sixty-two. When elected in 1994, he was the first public school teacher to receive membership in the Society. Cormier earned that distinction by bringing to the reading room an engaging blend of intellect, innovation, humility, humor, a passion for historical research, and great joy in sharing his learning with his students.

He began his association with the Society as a reader in the 1970s and quickly became a favorite of the staff, not least because he was the first reader to bring in (and show off) a personal computer, a cumbersome early model that had to be wheeled from his car in a hand-truck. His research was focused principally on the early history of the town of Shrewsbury, a community he served as a member and sometimes chairman of the school committee from 1971 to 1983. 'Local history,' he wrote in 1986, 'is a wonderful window through which the more significant issues in American history come alive.' In 1991, after twenty-one years as a teacher at Grafton High School, Cormier moved to Shrewsbury High School, where primary documents in local history were again a staple of his courses. In 1994 he served the Society as a consultant and facilitator for an institute designed for schoolteachers.

In 1995 Cormier again involved the Society in an unprecedented educational adventure. After meticulous preparation, he brought his class of Advanced Placement students to the library to let them conduct focused research in primary sources and also

to instill in them his profound respect for the institution and its function. On other occasions he escorted students to public programs at the Society, where the quality of their questions and comments gave evidence of their careful preparation.

In a letter written in 1997 (a year before he was diagnosed with cancer), Cormier wrote: 'For some time now, I have concluded that teaching is more like tending a forest than tending a garden. The garden blossoms in a season, whereas teachers nurture growth whose enormous potential is seldom evident until many years after the fact.' Both before and after his death former students and their families testified to the uncommonly powerful influence he had exercised on countless students.

Cormier graduated from Assumption College, where he also earned a master's degree in history and a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study. After serving in the United States Air Force from 1959 to 1963, he began his professional career teaching at Assumption Preparatory School and coaching its track team from 1963 to 1970. He completed the Boston Marathon in 1983 and 1984.

The recipient of a John F. Kennedy Teaching Award for excellence in teaching and curriculum development in 1991, Cormier continued to seek opportunities that would increase his effectiveness in the classroom. He was selected to participate in the 1994 Stratford Seminar at Virginia Commonwealth University and a program on teaching with the use of artifacts at the New-York Historical Society in 1999. He was an elected member of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts and a member of the Worcester History Group and the Shrewsbury Historical Society.

Cormier is survived by his wife, Carol, three children, and a forest lovingly tended.

Kenneth J. Moynihan

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