Scholarship fund established for instructor

By JENNIFER PITTMAN
jenpittman@scsentinel.com

APTOS — A memorial scholarship has been created for Russell Bryant, a decorated WWII veteran who overcame a severe stutter and, during his 28 years as a Cabrillo College instructor, helped shape a vibrant Speech and Communications Department.

Bryan, 94, died last month from heart and renal failure at his home in Penn Valley, a small, rural community in Northern California. He had been on hospice services since August. His family has created a memorial scholarship fund for student veterans at Cabrillo.

It comes at an important time for the College, according to Melinda Silverstein, executive director of the Cabrillo College Foundation, the on-campus organization that manages gifts, donations and scholarships for the college. Cabrillo established a Veterans Center about two years ago and has experienced a 100 percent increase in the number of veterans and their dependents on campus. Today more than 200 students are veterans or their dependents.

“We are making a concerted effort to serve the veteran population better,” Silverstein said.

Ben Meade, a student veteran who works in the campus Veterans Office, said students have been hoping to put together funds for a scholarship at some point.

“This is huge,” he said.

“Russ was just an outstanding college instructor and an American hero,” said Jack Turner, a retired communications instructor, dean and interim vice president at Cabrillo. Turner was hired by Bryant in 1971. “We have a very large and successful Communications Department, it really started with Russ. He had a warmth about him that would put students at ease.”

Bryant was one of the first speech instructors hired by Bill Grant who was head of the Humanities Division at the time. His wife of 65 years, Juanita Bryant, later launched the Medical Assistants Program at the college.

“He was first-class in my opinion,” Grant said from his Aptos home. “He had pres-
ence. He was forthright, honest-looking with a good face and good eyes and he had a wonderful personality.”

But, Grant said, he was also very serious about his job and students often returned to say how much they’d learned.

Bryant’s passion for teaching was informed largely by his personal challenges as a former stutterer and as a combat veteran.

“It gave him a point of view with the students who might be hesitant or stumbling and it gave them some inspiration,” said Grant who last saw his former colleague in the spring at a reunion of retired faculty. Bryant had driven his wife all the way from Penn Valley in his old Lincoln.

Students, who often would prefer root canals to public speaking, were invited to be comfortable in his class, Turner said.

“They not only respected him, there was a general warmth for him,” Turner said. “Russ was a very talented teacher and the heart and soul of the Communications Studies Department. He set the philosophy for a successful program. He had a warmth and empathy and that permeated through the department.”

One of Bryant’s passions was working with youth and he took young people from his church on annual waterskiing trips. At the end of one of these summer trips, he encountered a youth group from a poor congregation in San Jose and he stayed on an extra week to take them waterskiing. It was one of his favorite summer trips ever.

said his daughter, Sally Bryant.

“He loved the water,” she said. “The family joke is that Daddy always took the long way home. He always drove home along the water.”

Bryant read at least two newspapers a day, was a fan of the 49ers, the Oakland Athletics and the Cabrillo College baseball team. One year he was awarded a medal of appreciation from the Cabrillo team for his perfect game attendance. As a decorated veteran, he shared his memories openly with others.

“The students gravitated to him, especially the veterans who knew they could share with him,” Sally Bryant said. “I think he wanted people to remember that war is just horrible for people on both sides, that it should be a last option. He loved his country but he didn’t wear his flag on his sleeve. He said ‘Make sure the things you’re fighting for are worthwhile and keep nurturing those qualities.’”

Bryant was also history buff known for occasional dramatic recitations in the hallways. In a deep baritone he could recite Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s last dramatic speech in which he quoted an old barracks’s song: “Old soldiers never die; they just fade away.”

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