

Endowed scholarship ensures woman's heartfelt support of SIUE students lives on

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EDWARDSVILLE - Devoted employee Mary Rast's dedication to biology students at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville continues through a newly endowed scholarship in her honor.

Rast had been the laboratory manager in the College of Arts and Sciences' (CAS) Department of Biological Sciences for 45 years at the time of her death in August 2016.

She was known for her faithful friendship, genuine smile, great conversation and enthusiastic belief in students' bright futures.

In honor of her dedicated service and helpfulness to students, four biological sciences faculty members contributed funds to create the Mary Rast Senior Award in Biological Sciences. Recently, Rast's husband, Bob Cunningham, made a generous gift to endow the scholarship, ensuring his wife's impact will continue with students in her former department.

"Endowed scholarships are extremely impactful because they provide scholarship support to students annually, and the fund pays out in perpetuity," said CAS Director of Development Kyle Moore. "I'm honored to help Bob and our dedicated faculty members leave a lasting legacy for Mary at SIUE."

"Mary is greatly missed in the Department of Biological Sciences," said Associate Professor Faith Liebl, PhD. "Her cheery disposition and helpful nature truly made the department better. She was always eager to help with a smile, an offering of a candy snack and a genuine interest in you as a person. She was the same with everyone - faculty, students, vendors, delivery personnel."

"Mary devoted so much time and energy to our department and cared immensely for our students," added instructor Abby Stephens. "We're thrilled to have an award in her honor, and thank Bob for his heartfelt gift."

The creation and initial funding of the Mary Rast Senior Biology Award came as a surprise to Cunningham, who emphasized Rast's love for the University and recalled her many SIUE visitors when she was ill.

"This was one of the most touching tributes imaginable," Cunningham said. "I will never be able to thank those responsible for this tribute enough."

While driving to the 2018 CAS Honors Day celebration, Cunningham says he was struck by the fact that this year's recipient could be the last recipient to have met his beloved wife.

"The fact that the passage of time would also affect the funding of this award occurred to me," he explained. "The Mary Rast Senior Biology Award is as fitting a tribute to Mary's life and spirit as one could imagine. I became convinced that its continuation is the perfect memorial to her."

“Those that know me will attest that I do not spend money easily,” Cunningham noted. “But, this donation was made gladly and willingly. I feel that, more than a donation, it is the best money I have ever spent.”

“Mary would have been so tickled by this,” said Associate Professor Kelly Barry, PhD. “She and Bob were especially close, and this endowment reflects Bob’s love for Mary.”

The Mary Rast Senior Award in Biological Sciences supports biology students pursuing the ecology, evolution and environment specialization. Recipients will have demonstrated good academic standing in their specialty courses and a commitment to conservation initiatives and community outreach.

“Mary would come home with stories about students she had befriended and taken an interest in their studies,” Cunningham recalled. “Most of these students were attending SIUE on a tight budget and they availed themselves of all accessible financial help. Mary continued to follow many of these students after their studies were complete and as they were progressing through life.”

“Mary had a real soft spot for the students in our department and knew a surprisingly large number of them at a personal level,” Barry explained. “This scholarship will provide a level of financial security to students. Beyond mere finances, it provides recognition that can enhance students’ career opportunities.”

For more information on SIUE’s Department of Biological Sciences, visit siue.edu/biological-sciences.

To support the Mary Rast Senior Award in Biological Sciences, please contact CAS Director of Development Kyle Moore at (618) 650-5048 or kymoore@siue.edu.

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