

Freeman T. Frank; taught high school history; at 76

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Freeman T. Frank was a high school history teacher in Melrose, but his death is being felt by former students from coast to coast.

"He was a very inspirational man who was a fiery orator and wore his heart on his sleeve," State Representative Michael E. Festa of Melrose said of the man who inspired him to enter politics.

"He showed me the possibilities of the life of the mind and was instrumental in my choosing the law as a career," said Paul Salamanca, another former student, who was a clerk for Supreme Court Justice David Souter before becoming a professor at the University of Kentucky College of Law.



Mr. Frank, who taught at Melrose High School for 32 years until his retirement in 1992, died of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease Wednesday in the Lahey Clinic in Burlington. He was 76 and had recently lived in Malden.

Among Mr. Frank's legacies at Melrose High was his work as coach of the school's debating team, the former students said.

"The debating team was the equivalent of a sport to us, and he was our coach. But he was more than coach, he was a mentor and an inspiration," Salamanca said.

Dan Pallotta, who owns and operates a design and marketing firm in Los Angeles, recalls how Mr. Frank was giving of his time and of his attention.

"Every afternoon at 4:00, after all the other teachers had sped for home, you'd find Freeman in a classroom with a bunch of us, glasses on his nose, eyes at the top of their sockets, feverishly taking notes on each of our debate speeches, one by one," Pallotta said.

He said the fledgling debaters anxiously awaited Mr. Frank's feedback.

"Oh how it made you feel to get his notes after your speech," Pallotta said. "He knew how to inspire you. He took no pride in denigrating, or using his superior mind to intimidate you. He always used it to motivate. ... Here was an adult who took an interest in us, and it showed every night as the clock ticked closer and close to five."

The fourth of eight children born to a paper mill worker who also worked a small farm, Mr. Frank was born in Vassalboro, Maine, and was raised in the towns of Minot and Poland.

He worked his way through high school and Boston University with a succession of jobs, including woodchopper, dishwasher, waiter, and truck driver. He served in the Army for two years during the Korean War and was a reporter briefly for the Lewiston Evening Journal in 1953.

He earned a master's degree at Bridgewater State College.

Mr. Frank taught in Medfield, Templeton and Kingston before joining the faculty at Melrose High, where he usually began the school year with his theatrical reading of William Jennings Bryant's fiery "Cross of Gold" speech from the 1896 Democratic National Convention.

"He practiced a rabid brand of left-wing politics that sometimes bled into his classes," said his son Adam, of Medford. "He wasn't afraid to teach the dark side of capitalism."

Another son, Calvin, of Malden, said, "His father worker in the paper mill, 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and I think that affected him."

Festa said Mr. Frank took 14-year-olds and taught them what life is all about.

"I don't know what I would have become if I hadn't met him," said Festa, who was recently appointed secretary of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs.

In addition to his sons, Mr. Frank leaves his wife, Sally (Wallace); two sisters Joanne Baumgartel and Sally Belisle, both of Lewiston, Maine; a brother, Royal of Hackett Mills, Maine; and three grandchildren.

A funeral service will be held at 11 a.m. today in First Congregational Church in Malden. Burial will be in Wyoming Cemetery, Melrose.

Credit: Tom Long Globe Correspondent. Boston Globe