

Gene Poschman, 1935-2021

Gene Poschman served in the Political Science Department at Cal State Hayward when the campus was still called California State College, Hayward. He died on Sept. 8, 2021. He was a man of tremendous intellect, energy, humor and drive for power. He challenged his students, especially in his favorite courses, the ones that focused on political theory, which was the subject of his doctoral work at U.C. Berkeley. He would enter the classroom with a stack of books and provoke the students to grapple with a startling range of ideas. His conversations with colleagues, on any subject, sparked surprising thoughts, strong emotions and – always – laughter. In 1972 he co-edited (with Joseph Fiszman) *The American Political Arena*, a collection of articles for use in American government courses that raised challenging theoretical questions.

Gene was intensely interested in faculty governance. He had earlier served on the staff of Jesse Unruh, the powerful Speaker of the California Assembly, who taught him how to organize and inspire people to achieve political goals. He learned the lessons well. For over three decades, he was the dominant figure in assuring a powerful voice for the Cal State faculty in how the university was run. His actions were often controversial.

During a budget crisis in the 1970s, he organized the faculty to oppose the Administration's plans to lay off a large number of junior faculty members. He led a faculty push for proposals that enabled faculty from many fields to teach courses in the understaffed School of Business for a few years until the crisis was over – thus saving many departments from being shredded.

For many years, he recruited talented faculty members to run for the Academic Senate and its committees so that a strong curriculum was sustained and faculty rights were protected. When he was present at a meeting, he always meticulously researched the issues at hand so as to ensure that the best decisions would be made. But Gene didn't believe in solemn, boring meetings. Any faculty meeting where he was present was lively and full of laughter. He saw no conflict between doing serious business and having a jolly time.

Gene had a second career, which overlapped his career at Cal State. He was a powerful figure in Berkeley city government, serving for many years on the Zoning

Adjustments Board and the Planning Commission. See [A Remembrance of Gene Poschman. Category: Extra from The Berkeley Daily Planet.](#)

Gene Poschman was a truly unforgettable character.

- Emily Stoper, Professor Emerita of Political Science, CSU East Bay

When I knew Gene Poschman in the flesh it was simply not possible to think of him as deceased. Too much immediacy, too much vitality.

I first remember meeting Gene at his small flatland house in 1967, 55 years ago, even when I've otherwise forgotten so much. He was actually the first lefty I ever met. I got a full dose of Pacifica Radio and educated views on Vietnam

Back in the day, the Music Building was the location of poli sci and I was an Assistant, nontenured. I knew I had to meet my classes; that was about it. Gene, bemused by my ignorance, but very nice, patiently explained why tenure was nice, and promotion was nice.

Gene was not a scholar as much as he was an intellectual politician (IP); a talker, not a writer. It was the immediate human relationships that drew him in, along with Annie (wife) and hobnobbing over fine wines with Tom Morrison. Tom, also an IP, never got his Ph.D. but somehow got a job as some kind of assistant to Pres. Ellis McCune. I suspect Gene was involved, along with running the department and the Academic Senate.

As a lefty, he was strongly pro-union, but pragmatically, not from ideological bias. He knew the rules, the grievance procedures, for defending faculty from abuse by administrators. By the same token he knew the rules for dismissing faculty for cause, and could make them work if needed. During his time as chair, the Department had an alcoholic prof and mentally ill prof and Gene patiently and carefully used the rules to ease them out.

He had a devastating wit, which he used to skewer those he viewed as stuffed shirts, which was basically those less verbally adroit. But he was so joyful in damning them that it was really about how much he enjoyed how clever he was.

Gene held sway in the Academic Senate for perhaps 20 years. The Poschman program pushed for faculty influence in administrative decisions and his chosen candidates were consistently elected to the Senate. At about that time, Gene was eligible for retirement with its generous benefits for doing nothing. Finally, he overplayed his hand. Many faculty did not want him to run things from retirement. They rebelled and his candidate for Senate chair was defeated. Nevertheless, he continued to have an interest in faculty affairs, largely through Bill Reuter.

If I knew Gene, he would act irate so enthusiastically it would be hard to tell he really was irate or just really enjoyed acting irate. He would blow off steam and

move on--unless you reminded him about it and he would then blow off steam again. Russ Merris was aware of Gene's loss of influence and wrote him an appreciative letter thanking him for his amazing legacy and describing the attention his political disciples, rebellious or not, continued to give faculty governance. As far as Russ knew, Gene in time took it well and never "interfered" again.

I was sorry not to see Gene after he retired, but I understand his connection with a Berkeley Councilmember got him appointed to the Berkeley Board of Zoning Adjustments, which he naturally took over. I think we only connected to write a memorial for the saintly Jim Nichols.

I miss Gene's sharp mind, the big smile, and the protruding chin with stubble.

- Sherman Lewis, Professor Emeritus of Political Science, CSU East Bay