



CALIFORNIA STATE  
UNIVERSITY  
EAST BAY

# Announcement

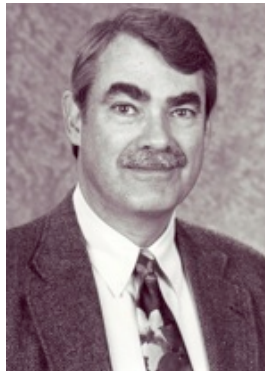
Office of Academic Affairs

## James Lloyd Nichols, Professor Emeritus of the Department of Political Science, Passed Away January, 22, 2014

James L. Nichols, Professor Emeritus of the Department of Political Science, passed away January 22, 2014. He began his career at CSU, Hayward (East Bay) in 1966, retired in 1998, and participated in the Faculty Early Retirement Program until 2002. He served as Department Chair from January 1977 to June 1978. He then served as Acting Associate Dean and Associate Dean of the School of Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences until 1982. Among his other duties in the years preceding his retirement were the Directorship of the Liberal Studies Program and PACE (Program for Accelerated College Education).

The following has been provided by his family and colleagues.

"Becalmed as I am in the mudflats of life..."  
James L. Nichols dies, January 22, 2014.



- **James Lloyd Nichols** was born on October 7, 1933 in Denver, Colorado, where he spent most of his childhood and teen years.
- He began as an English/journalism major at the University of Denver, but graduated in 1954 with a BA as a social science area major.
- He attended Johns Hopkins in 1955 and Syracuse University in 1956, receiving a master's degree in political science.
- He married Elizabeth Valenti on March 2, 1957 in Syracuse, New York.
- Their daughter Martha was born in 1958 and their son Mark in 1960.
- Jim Nichols attended Stanford University from 1961 to 1968, earning a Ph.D. in political science in 1969.
- He started work at Cal State Hayward in fall 1966.
- He participated in the Faculty Early Retirement Program (FERP) from 1998 to 2002.
- Then, as his body went down, his spirit rose in poetry. See "The Poetry" below.

## **Please send memorial gifts to**

The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research Church Street Station, P.O. Box 78 New York, NY 10008-0780 You may give online at <http://www.michaeljfox.org/>

## **Martha Nichols, In Memoriam**

My father Jim Nichols passed away the morning of January 22, 2014. By that point, he had moved several times, until he arrived at his last board-and-care home, a kindly place where he lived his final two-and-a-half years. He died peacefully, in hospice care, several days after a stroke took him down. My brother Mark and I were with him, as were the caregivers Dad had grown fond of.

He was a remarkable man, a well-loved professor, student adviser, and former dean at what is now called Cal State East Bay in Hayward, California. (We knew it as Cal State Hayward when he worked there.) He was a political scientist who specialized in China studies, but also taught courses in California politics and "Vietnam and Watergate." From an early age, I remember his blow-by-blow accounts of Republican and Democratic conventions, as if he were reporting sports events.

In 1968, late one June night, we sat together in shocked silence, watching RFK's assassination unfold on TV. I clung to his hand with all my might.

My father's strong moral compass and deep love of literature, especially poetry, have made me who I am. Because of him, I'm a skeptic, a critic, a journalist, an editor. Most of all, I'm a writer. My belief that creative work can make a real difference goes straight back to my childhood: to my mother the artist and my father the academic. It's as ingrained in me as religious faith.

Dad was first diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in the year 2000 and endured a series of medical ups and downs—including other small strokes—throughout the succeeding decade. But one of the most astonishing transformations he went through was a creative one. After he stopped teaching at Cal State in 2002, he spent several years writing poetry. He'd wanted to be a writer for decades, ever since he was an English/Journalism major at the University of Denver in the early 1950s. By the time he graduated at the precocious age of twenty, he'd switched to the social sciences, but—*goddammit!*—he finally achieved his literary goal in his seventies.

In the early stages of Parkinson's, the dopamine drugs that patients take can spark intense bouts of creativity as well as hallucinations. These side effects have been well documented by neurologists like Oliver Sacks. But I prefer to think of my father's late-life poetry writing as a gift conferred by capricious fate.

I doubt he would have chosen two years of intensive creativity over a far longer, healthier life in which he could converse about Obamacare and California going to hell in a hand basket (just for example) with his family and friends. Still, I'm not sure, because I know how much his poems mattered to him.

My mother, Elizabeth Valenti Nichols, would copy the cramped handwriting of his early drafts into neat copies on yellow legal pads. He was the love of her life—and she his—and Mom urged him to keep writing, until she herself succumbed to Alzheimer's. She died in January 2013, and I think it's no accident his death came only two days shy of that sad anniversary.

## Remembrances from CSU Colleagues

**Sherman Lewis**, Professor Emeritus of Political Science, [Sherman@csu Hayward.us](mailto:Sherman@csu Hayward.us):

Unbeknownst to most of us, Jim was a poet. In 2009, he mailed his friends copies of his first chapbook, *October Notes*—imaginative, contradictory, with many moods and images, with irony, complaints, and good humor. By this time, he was in poor health and unable to attend a Saturday event we held for him on November 21, 2009 in the Biella Room of the CSUEB Library. His daughter Martha read some poems for him and several of us spoke. I think we made a videotape for Jim; if so, I've lost track of it.

His poor health was due to Parkinson's disease, and we raised some funds for the Michael Fox Foundation, which supports cutting-edge research, including help from volunteer subjects.

We have to drop back in time to reminisce about the many years Professor Emeritus Jim Nichols of the Political Science Department served on this campus.

I shared an office with Jim from about 1970 to 2002. He was one of the finest people I know, a prince. He spent many hours patiently advising students on what courses to take and teaching political science. He was always fun to talk to, which didn't always help us get our work done. For us, administrators were background; we and our students were what it was all about. Jim made Cal State Hayward his village and, as we all know, it takes good professors to make a village work.

With his passing, we know the man in full—family, scholar, colleague, poet.

**Gene Poschman**, Professor Emeritus of Political Science, [poschman1@comcast.net](mailto:poschman1@comcast.net):

Memories of the great and good Jim Nichols: No particular instance which catches the special essence of Jim Nichols, but rather the 30 years during which his judgment was simply indispensable to his fellow faculty in the Political Science Department; the School of Arts, Letters and Social Science; the Academic Senate; and the whole campus.

A term comes to mind for the very few faculty like Jim—"a natural"—as in naturally the chair of the Political Science Department, the Chair of the Academic Senate, and Associate Dean of Arts, Letters and Social Science. He was always one of those colleagues who one wanted to know what his thinking was on the important issues.

And Cal State Hayward had important issues during that time. We had probably the most effective and well-organized faculty in the Cal State System because of the talent of members like Jim Nichols.

Jim received his Ph.D. from Stanford and was a totally dedicated China specialist—he kept up to date with the news, or what was thought to be happening, in China. His class on the Political Systems of Asia was excellent, as were all of the many courses that he taught.

Jim Nichols was a very rare type of faculty member who was totally dedicated to advising students. Considering the special complexity of the Liberal Studies Major (14 pages in the University Catalog for 1992-94), he was a legend to his fellow faculty. I speak for many who were so very fortunate to have been at Cal State Hayward because of colleagues like Jim Nichols.

**Emily Stoper**, Professor Emeritus of Political Science, [estoper1@yahoo.com](mailto:estoper1@yahoo.com):

Jim Nichols is gone, and I am very sad. He was such a good man, almost a saint. It seems terribly

unfair that he went through so much suffering in his later years. Whenever I think of him, the words dedication, compassion, humility, and wisdom spring to mind. He was movie-star handsome but somehow didn't know it—had none of the swagger of other handsome men. Jim had character. He managed to be in the thick of faculty governance without ever being caught up in the tangle of petty rivalries and grievances that swirled around it. To talk to him about any issue was to partake of his deep sanity. When I visited him in the nursing home, he was bedridden, yet we had another in our series of wonderful conversations. Jim was always witty, erudite, and humane. I feel deeply privileged to have been his colleague for over 30 years.

**Hal Barrett**, Professor Emeritus of English, [h-barrett@comcast.net](mailto:h-barrett@comcast.net)

I was a professor of rhetoric and communication at Cal State Hayward from 1963 to 1992, twenty-nine years. During my time, no professor there commanded greater respect than James L. Nichols, my dear friend.

I can cite many instances of his valuable contributions as he involved himself in the University community. Jim “did it all,” serving in all capacities, in teaching and faculty governance: in legislative, administrative, and advisory roles. He was well acquainted with the pick-and-shovel work required in building programs, establishing policies, and answering challenges. He was admirably equipped, excelling as writer, speaker, and listener (and reader, as evidenced in his poetry). Functional argumentation is a *sine qua non* for success in campus government. Jim was a model. I once told him that I thought highly of his participation, and then I gave him a name: Citizen of the Campus. And that he was, unsurpassed in intelligent, unselfish, and useful contribution.

My last contact with Jim was in 2012, I think, when he put me in touch with the Parkinson's organization. Also, he sent me a copy of his poetry, *October Notes*. I read and appreciated the poetry that Jim placed in that volume, chuckling here and there—and nodding in agreement with his musings, the products of his expansive mind. I learned that we share an interest in the Spanish language and things Latin, as well as a kind of sweet crotchiness or crankiness or unease in social outlook.

**Nancy Sadoyama**, PACE Director (retired) [nansha@fire2wire.com](mailto:nansha@fire2wire.com):

It was my privilege and good fortune to work with Jim Nichols from 1989, when he became Director of Liberal Studies, until his retirement. Liberal Studies was a large, complicated major that aptly suited his meticulous nature and had a huge number of majors. When Jim met with the Dean some years later seeking much-needed additional resources, we were stunned to learn that the Dean wanted us to assume control of PACE (Program for Accelerated College Education). The program was created for working adults and offered majors in Human Development and Liberal Studies. Since we were already providing academic advising for the Liberal Studies PACE students, we were familiar with the program.

At our first PACE orientation, we were pleasantly surprised to see 50 new students arrive, about double the size of previous orientations. After several years of very hard work, Jim took great satisfaction in seeing that the program had grown to nearly 400 students by the time he retired. Through it all, he was unfailingly gracious and kind to all he encountered. The PACE students adored him, and our intrepid faculty always seemed to agree to any convoluted schedule that was needed.

At one point, the President asked him to be Interim Dean of the School of Arts, Letters and Social Science, but he declined. He would much rather continue working directly with the students. He

was an uncommon gentleman who was beloved by everyone on campus. He will be sorely missed and certainly never forgotten.

(Among the profs who worked on these programs with Jim Nichols were Al Smith, Rhoda Agin, Noel Samaroo, Judith Stanley, Sophia Lee, Dan Prentice, Tom Hall, Dick Orsi, Rolf Benseler, Lynne Elkin, and Alan Almquist. Apologies for omissions.)

## The Poetry of Jim Nichols

### Runaway Carousel

*Poem by James Nichols (2009)*

Becalmed as I am in the mudflats of  
Life, I find myself assaulted by a  
Peculiar malady: I must write and  
Write still faster, like a battered,  
Funky carousel, blowing steam  
And ringing bells as it plunges  
Straight to hell, while all my  
Work collapses into wet cardboard  
And molasses—molasses? Jesus Christ,  
What is this? Help! Help! My God...  
Can't you see that I am being  
Murdered by my own poetry?

Voices then boom out, "Ha!  
Poetry, you say? Looks more like  
Rhymes-with-'it' to me. Who are you  
To screw the English language?  
Try something else!"

I thought a bit, then did an  
Overhaul and retrofit. Painful, I admit,  
But what the hell, it was only my  
Mind and ego that I lost; I just  
Wanted a decent place to eat out, not too high in cost.  
I can now cheerfully report that I still work  
With words of a certain sort, as here  
I sit where the Master used to sit, on  
Madison Avenue. (Number 244, you've been there, havenue?)

(The Master was Ogden Nash; see <http://www.aenet.org/poems/ognash6.htm> for "havenue.")

### From "I Know What Poetry Can Do" (2010)

by Martha Nichols (<http://talkingwriting.com/i-know-what-poetry-can-do>):

On Friday night, I told my father we'd bring over what he needs: a bookcase, an armchair. For the

third time, he asked me if he was moving tomorrow.

“No, on Sunday, Dad. You’re moving on Sunday.”

“Can we work on the poetry?” he said then. “That’s the thing.”

When I arrived that evening in June 2010, I was exhausted from my cross-country flight, the three-hour time difference, Friday rush hour traffic, the hellish creep across the Bay Bridge. My mother was a mess. But even so, I typed my father’s latest poem on my laptop, working from the scraps my brother had written out and Dad’s slow recitation.

It was the weekend before Father’s Day. I fought my own melancholy, the sense that I was doing grave injury to someone helpless to change his fate.

In his prime, my father was never sentimental. Now, he had advanced Parkinson’s disease, and he knew it was time to leave home. He knew. But that didn’t change his nervousness, the potential for him to go mulish at the last minute.

The next morning, he said he’d had a terrible night’s sleep. He was weak, his drugs hadn’t kicked in. He didn’t think he could do it. “Maybe I’ve had a stroke,” he said.

“No, Dad. Just wait for your medicine to work. There’s no rush.”

Although, of course, there was a rush. It was Saturday, less than 24 hours to go.

“I’m in a deep hole,” he said.

I wanted to take him to the new place again for a quick visit, so he’d worry less—so I’d worry less. He would tell me what he wanted in his room at the small board-and-care: which books and family pictures, which diplomas. I wanted this thing *done*.

He started to talk about the CIA in Vietnam and how somebody listed him as a reference in obscure academic papers—as a CIA cover?

“Did you read all the Vietnam stuff last night?” I asked wearily.

“No, no. I got rid of that months ago.”

Yet the night before, the delusions had plagued him again, another gyration of Parkinsonian paranoia. Sometimes he even knew they were delusions.

A CD blared in the background, Muzak versions of famous movie songs. The theme from *Dr. Zhivago* (“Somewhere My Love”) played, an especially ironic counterpoint to my father’s calm assessment of machinations in post-1954 Vietnam and the people he knew later in the Nixon administration.

“I kept the article with that footnote,” he said. “They misspelled my name.”

Could it be true? We were talking about the CIA; my father was a retired political scientist who had specialized in Mao’s China. Dad’s voice sounded low and slurred, but he was putting complicated sentences together.

“Can you show me the reference?” I asked.

Oh, no, he said. He’d had his home caregiver throw it away. Somebody was walking around with

his name, a CIA ghost.

Round and round we went. Sense and nonsense from a man whom I'd loved forever, whom I'd always admired for his sharp wit—who pushed me to paroxysms of impatience, as if I were still fifteen and sick of his Socratic method, the way he would scoff at all my heated arguments for why the world needs to be a better place.

I remember collapsing on the floor in a fury, pounding my fists against the green shag, my dashing handsome father looking down, his eyebrows raised.

"What's wrong?" he'd ask. I was supposed to be his best student.

In this, he would never change. The Parkinson's had brought certain character traits to the fore. Rational me coolly assessed the good with the bad, but what struck me most was how much sweetness had floated to his surface.

He became like Yuri Zhivago, stuck in a snow storm. That Saturday was hot in the Bay Area, Mediterranean weather, and so far from a wintertime *dacha* with Hollywood icicles that the connection only made sense to me: the saturated blue sky, the Muzak, my father's achingly long pauses between words.

Again, he wanted to go over his latest poem. He kept talking about how strange he felt, how dark. He told me he couldn't stand up—but the poem?

I gave him the pages I'd printed out, and they rattled in his hand.

"Do you want me to read it, Dad?"

He huddled in his chair, still staring at the pages. It was his last day at home. I was poised on the couch, ready to run.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, you could do that."

So I read "A Ride to the Church Yard," and his body relaxed. I knew then he would make the visit that morning. Although my brother and mother were as jittery as cats in a sack, I knew we'd get him moved on Sunday. Their anxiety fed my own, but I knew how to retreat to the *dacha*, too.

I know what poetry can do.

It was almost as if I could foresee the moment later that afternoon, when my brother and I drove to Target to find a few more things for Dad's room, when we stopped talking about logistics. The silence sank in between us, suburban bungalows and strip malls passing on either side, long-winded rationalizations no longer conveying any of the emotional essence.

"Life," my brother said. "You know?"

Or as if I could envision the next day—because Sunday did come, hot and bright—when Dad and I walked slowly up the ramp of his new home.

He clutched my hand, and I felt his fingers bucking. They were always in motion, but he held on as hard as he could. He took his tiny, tiny steps forward, and I matched his pace—*there's no rush, Dad*—as one of the caregivers in blue opened the door.

## A Ride to the Church Yard

*Poem by James Nichols (2010)*

Josh, the funeral home driver Shivered at the damp and cold. Riding beside him was the tow-headed ten-year-old And his two giggly baby sisters, Hair all shiny like spun gold. As they turned in the gate beneath the tower, Josh thought, *Sure enough, that mouthy boy Will say something all too bold.*

“Sir, does that clunky clock keep good time?”

*Enough for all you’ll ever need.*

“Sir, why are those rotting flowers piled everywhere?”

*To keep the squirrels from running through your hair.*

“Sir, why does that rusty old box stinketh so?”

*Because your nose is too damned big, you brat.*

“Sir, are you speaking? What was that?”

*You insolent pup, let me fling this box lid up. Now see what you’ve got.*

The boy stood stock still, like one dreaming;

No sound was heard except the young girls screaming.

Lines of pity creased the old man’s face. Gently, Josh said, “Come, child, every family For grief must have its place. And now we all must attend to Our own souls’ redeeming.”

The boy took his hand and went, content.

© Copyright California State University, East Bay