UST mourns loss of MLA director
University remembers, honors Gordon-Kelter's legacy

by ALLEN GRAZIADEI
CAULDRON STAFF

Hundreds of students, faculty and alumni filled the Chapel of St. Basil beyond its capacity on Feb. 3 to mourn the death and commemorate the life of Dean Janice Gordon-Kelter.

Gordon-Kelter unexpectedly died of cardiac arrest Jan. 6 while vacationing in Paris with her husband Irving Kelter. She was 60.

Born in Chicago, Gordon-Kelter earned a bachelor's degree with honors in history at Roosevelt University and a doctorate in 1988 in medieval history from City University of New York. She began working at UST in 1991, eventually becoming director of the MLA program in 1997. She was also dean of the program in 2001.

She will be remembered as a woman who cared passionately about education for all people and as an advocate, husband Irving Kelter said. Kelter, who is chair of the University's history department, married Gordon-Kelter in 1986.

Though an advocate for all students, Gordon-Kelter had a particular concern for adult and non-traditional students. "She found that's where she was needed most," Director of Academic Advising Sara Laidlaw said.

"She worked with non-traditional students as if they were family," Laidlaw said. While Gordon-Kelter was earning her bachelor's degree, her mother went to college with her and earned a degree herself. Gordon-Kelter kept her mother's diploma on her wall throughout her career.

"This was her passion," Gordon-Kelter's administrative assistant Kay Miller said. "She was totally focused and wanted it [the MLA program] to exceed students' expectations.

Contrary to convention, Gordon-Kelter set up her office just inside the front door of De La Salle House, where the MLA program is located. Students met her, not a receptionist, when they entered. Gordon-Kelter knew all of the students with whom she worked by name, Miller said. "She always had the deepest respect for her students and peers."

Student Government Association President Emiliano Herrera wrote in an e-mail to the Cauldron, "I was constantly amazed at her poise and knowledge about UST students and the campus.

While director and later dean of the MLA program, Gordon-Kelter continued to teach MLA courses as well as an honors course each year. During the summer she led reading development classes for students ranging from kindergartners to adults.

"We've got one of the most successful MLA programs in the nation," UST President Robert Ivany said. "It's a huge success due to her contribution."

Whether Gordon-Kelter was teaching, advising or nurturing the MLA program, she poured her heart and soul into all of them, Kelter said. "Every single person felt like they got 100 percent from her and they did," Laidlaw said. "She was this little tiny dynamo that made things happen when they needed to happen."

Gordon-Kelter was also an avid supporter of Friends of Doherty Library, assisting the group with everything from catering to lining up speakers. Although never a librarian, she also held a degree in library science.

"She was a primary force in revitalizing the Friends group back in 1993, and she was involved with every single event we have held since that time," Doherty Library Director James Piccininni wrote in an e-mail. "Janice will be very much missed for her leadership and her enthusiasm for the library and the students we serve."

For many students, Gordon-Kelter was a trusted adviser who helped them overcome obstacles. "She loved advising," Kelter said. Miller recalled an international student who had to be hospitalized for several weeks. Gordon-Kelter personally met with each of the student's professors to ensure that she would be able to complete her courses.

"She was very tenacious," Miller said. "She would do everything she could to help students fulfill their potential."

Kelter said that since his wife's death, he has received an "enormous response" from the UST community in the form of cards, messages and phone calls of support. Miller said that the phone at the MLA office has rung "off the hook" with calls from alumni and current students. "I hear quite often, 'She's the reason I was here...she believed in me,'" Miller said.

The University has instituted the Dr. Janice Gordon-Kelter Memorial Scholarship in her honor. The scholarship will benefit the adult and non-traditional students for whom she felt such concern. In addition the University will match the first $20,000 donated.

Gordon-Kelter is survived by her husband; sister Susan Gordon Baum; brother Lawrence Gordon; and aunt Leona Weil.

Donations may be made to the Dr. Janice Gordon-Kelter Memorial Fund at:
Institutional Advancement
c/o Donald Lewis, Box 88
University of St. Thomas
3800 Montrose Blvd.
Houston, TX 77006

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PATIENT MOURNERS stood in the cold wind throughout a ceremony held in memory of the late MLA Dean Janice Gordon-Kelter. Students, colleagues and friends attended the afternoon ceremony held on Feb. 3 at 3 p.m. at the Chapel of St. Basil.