

## NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Bryan Schrepel 913-758-6165

E-mail: [SchrepelB@stmary.edu](mailto:SchrepelB@stmary.edu)



# In Memoriam: Legendary USM Professor of English Passes Away at Age 71

(Leavenworth, Kan.)— After retiring in 2000, Michael Paul Novak continued to show up at his corner office inside the University of Saint Mary English department. He loved spending his days reading and writing in his home away from home. On Dec. 2, Novak passed away. He was 71.

Born in Cicero, Illinois July 6, 1935, Novak was first appointed instructor of English at then Saint Mary College in 1963. He would not leave the classroom for nearly 40 years, finally putting the chalk away in 2000. Upon his retirement, he was conferred professor emeritus, a lifelong distinction awarded to distinguished professors with long-terms of service to Saint Mary. He was also awarded the Sullivan Award that year, the university's top honor for teaching excellence.

Prior to joining the Saint Mary English faculty, Novak earned a bachelor's degree from Catholic University in Washington, D.C. in 1957. He later earned a Master's Degree in Fine Arts (MFA) in creative writing from the prestigious University of Iowa "Writers' Workshop" in 1962. UI's "Writers' Workshop" is known as the best creative writing school in the country, producing globally known talents ranging from Paul Engle to Flannery O'Connor.

"He was great from the minute, as a writer," said Sister Susan Rieke, chair of the English department and close friend.

From the start of his teaching career to the end, those who knew Novak well witnessed a growth first hand. He was an intelligent, introverted teacher at first. After just a few years however, he became a complete, well-rounded professor people like Sister Mary Ernestine Whitmore always knew he could be.

Whitmore was the chair of the English department for more than 36 years, retiring in 1972. She hired Novak, and guided him to greatness. For that, Novak loved her dearly.

"His love for Sister Mary Ernestine was deep and long-lasting," said Sister Marie Brinkman, who was also hired by Whitmore, and started when Novak did in 1963.

"His love for her was full of respect. He revered her. She brought him up, as we say. Under her tutelage, and she was very firm in what she expected, she brought him out. He was very shy. And he learned the ease and joy of conversation from associating with her and people like Sister Mary Janet McGilley," she said.

An avid writer and accomplished poet, Novak published four books of poetry and one book of short stories. Along with internationally known scholar Richard Gilmore, Novak co-edited *Poets, Poetics, and Politics*, acclaimed by *The New York Times* as one of the best books of 1992. In 1996, he collaborated with Rieke, and the late Sister Mary Janet McGilley, who served as USM president and English professor, to publish a book of poetry, *From the Tower*. Up until his death, Novak and Rieke continued to use *From the Tower* for public poetry readings.

Ironically enough, Novak knew he wanted to be a poet even when he was a little boy. Rieke explains, "He told me once that when he was very little he wanted to be a poet. For someone to say that they wanted to be a poet, I've always thought showed great confidence, but also a real recognition of his talents," she said.

At Saint Mary, Novak served on various academic committees and campus groups, from the young democrats to the academic affairs council. He was chair of the English Department from 1972-1976. He loved teaching courses at the Lansing Correctional Facility in the 1980s until federal funding was cut. He was also instrumental in developing and maintaining a student exchange program with Sophia University of Japan that was wildly successful in the 1960s and 1970s.

A shy person by nature, he often called himself an odd peg at Saint Mary.

“I know when he was in the hospital and Sister Sue Miller (Community Director for the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth) came to see him, he said ‘I was such an odd fit to your place, and it worked,’ and he was in some ways,” Rieke said. “But he was so drawn to the sisters, to the students that it worked beautifully.”

Rieke and Brinkman both believe his Saint Mary legacy will always be his teaching clarity and poetic genius. They will miss their friend and colleague.

“I loved conversations with Mike. He was so personable once you got to know him. His eyes shined with affection—he smiled with his eyes,” Brinkman said. “That’s what you come to know about him.”

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