



Still Purple after These Years

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Photograph by Kevin Kenefick

Stories have been edited for clarity and space but appear online in their entirety at www.williams.edu/admin/president/.
Send your own story about Morty Schapiro to news@williams.edu.

My senior fall, I was lucky enough to nab one of the six spots in Morty's tutorial "The Strange Economics of College." During discussions—often of his own work—Morty would stop one of us and say, "Sure, that's my argument, but isn't there a chance that I'm wrong?" Questioning each other's ideas was a two-way street, and the product of that openness was a challenging tutorial that I remember for its vibrant discussions and comfortable atmosphere.

What added even further to our class—and what certainly isn't captured in a course catalog—was Morty's easy sense of humor. He poked fun at himself as often as he did at anyone else, and he pushed us to think seriously and engage in debate, but not to take ourselves too seriously.

– *Alexandra Roth '08*

When Morty Schapiro announced he'd be leaving Williams after nine years as president—and a total of 20 as an economics professor—good wishes and remembrances flooded in from every corner of Ephdom. There were also more than a few jokes about the weather (worse than Williamstown's) and school colors (still purple) at his new gig as president of Northwestern University. With his departure for Evanston, Ill., on the horizon, we asked members of the Williams community to share their own stories about Morty.

People reveal a lot about themselves on the golf course, and Morty Schapiro is no exception. The first time we played together, he greeted me with a broad smile and happily announced: "I'm terrible at skiing, but I'm much worse at golf." Morty played with determination, but the ball stubbornly refused to bounce his way. Nonetheless, his spirits remained high throughout the round, and on the 18th tee he declared, with firm resolve: "I'm getting it done." Before I could ask what he planned to accomplish, he answered my question: "I haven't made a par yet. I'm making a par." He promptly launched his best drive of the day and strode down the fairway as if the U.S. Open were at stake. His second shot left him with a chance, but a wayward third dashed the dream. Disappointed but undeterred, Morty insisted, "Let's play again next week!"

A few days later, I saw him taking a lesson from the pro, and afterward I congratulated him for getting advice on his game. "Oh," Morty replied, "I won't be doing that again." "Why not?" I asked. "Because I don't like being told what to do!" And he burst into laughter. Morty the golfer is a lot like Morton Owen Schapiro, president of Williams College: focused, optimistic, resilient, proud, enthusiastic, independent and quick with a laugh at his own expense.

– *Will Dudley '89,*
philosophy professor

Having Morty as our president really means having the entire Schapiro family as part of our Williams experience. As Morty and Mimi open up their house to the College community, whether through hosting dinners or Halloween trick or treat, we have the privilege of getting to know his family and playing with their dog Cha Cha. Their hospitality has a trickle-down effect that has made Williams a more open environment.

Another thing that I love about Morty is how real he is. Perhaps that is why we feel at ease calling him “Morty.” When he agreed to speak at Story Time last fall, he opened up to us. When I accidentally arrived late to my first day of class with him, he did not hesitate to send evil stares my way and poke fun at me for the rest of the semester. And yet when someone made a good argument in class, he also let that person know immediately and encouraged more. When I approached him with College-wide or personal concerns, he always responded with compassion and a great deal of faith and support.

– Rachel Ko '09

I have seen firsthand Morty actively listening to students on many different occasions. During College Council meetings, he would call out students by name and knew at least one activity each was involved in. While sitting on the floor of my entry with some freshmen during Sunday snacks, he listened to their suggestions on how to improve college initiatives. In his tutorial, when we were presenting our papers that he seemed ever so interested in, he would always ask us our opinion, even on research that he is an expert in.

– Sura Tilakawardane '07

One of the first things that struck me about Williams as I arrived in the summer of 2000 was the remarkable collection of sacred spaces that dot our campus. Before long I began to think we should consider another site a part of that collection: 936 Main Street.

It quickly became clear that the Schapiros' annual invitation to the extended family of the Jewish community into their home to break the Yom Kippur fast would be just one of countless occasions of hospitality we've all come to associate with that house—and with Morty's and Mimi's embrace of the extended family of Williams itself. But when, in December of 2001, Muslims at Williams marked their first Ramadan fast since the catastrophe of 9/11, the Schapiros hosted not just an iftar (the joyful meal that comes at the end of each day of the month of daylight fasting) but also the maghrib, the evening prayer.

Since that evening, religious communities that had to wait a century or more to be welcomed into the Williams family have feasted on the bounty of the Schapiros' soul-warming hospitality. We've almost, but not quite, come to take for granted the sense of welcome that Morty and Mimi embody. But I think the image of Muslim prayer rugs spread out in the president's house—in the family room of a Jewish home—deserves to be remembered as a giant step that Williams took, following the lead of a faithful servant of this institution, into a very new century.

– The Rev. Rick Spalding,
chaplain to the College and
coordinator of community service

I first met Morty in 1980, when he came to teach at Williams. He and his family settled into a home on Prospect Street, which placed them as our new “back door” neighbors. They proved to be very friendly and cordial, and we were sorry to see them leave the area in 1991 for bigger and better things in California.

In 2000, when I sold my business on Spring Street and my wife planned an open house to thank our customers, lo and behold there he was on his very first day as president, with other William's presidents, to pay his respects, wish us well and express how sorry he was to see the business close.

When I joined the College buildings and grounds crew, I decided to make an appointment with him right away to solve a problem that I felt he might be able help me with. His secretary informed me he was leaving town for a week and was probably too busy, but she would give him the message and get back to me. I got a 15-minute appointment with him the next day. He and I ended up talking for an hour—with me answering many questions about his old neighborhood. I told him I ought to leave because I was only to have 15 minutes. He said, “Art, we don't take the time to just talk, and I enjoy it, so do not worry about it.” Typical Morty.

– Arthur L. Lafave, former Williams custodian and
longtime owner of the B&L Service Station

A classmate and I were in President Schapiro's office for a *Williams Record* interview. At the conclusion of the interview, I remember asking, “Mr. President, how do you feel about Krispy Kreme?” At the mention of the donut chain, Morty looked straight at us and said, “Krispy Kreme will kill you! In-N-Out will inspire you.” Which begs the question—why hasn't In-N-Out (a California-based burger chain) come to campus yet?

– Sergio Espinosa '02

My first real understanding of who Morty Schapiro was as a person was at his inauguration in September 2000. I will never forget his words and the spirit he invoked to those gathered in Chapin Hall. He encouraged all in attendance to seize the moment, as it was an opportunity to move the College and community forward. Morty seized that moment and every moment for the next nine years as he opened the doors of Williams to the entire Northern Berkshire community. His fingerprints are on so many great things that have happened in my city of North Adams.

– *John Barrett, North Adams mayor*

It was midsummer; the sun hot in the sky, a perfect July day. My son was going to camp, and so was Morty's. They were born a month or so apart. Their moms had bonded over the exhaustions of babyhood; the boys had been friends their whole lives. What could be more innocent fun, piling in Mort's car and taking them to camp?

Here is the lesson: the Mort Effect is a Powerful Effect, and it turns out the Mort Effect is amplified to positively overwhelming levels if it is encountered in an enclosed space.

The trip over there, about an hour and a half, was just a warm-up.

On the way back, Mort stealthily advanced his secret agenda. "Gee," he said, "I was talking with our mutual friend Nancy Roseman the other day about the possibility of teaching a class together. Kind of a neat idea! It would be about society and disease." What did I think of that?

"Oh," I said, not really focusing. "Sounds great! A lot of work, though..."

"Well," Mort said, his voice getting that special Tone, his eyes developing that special Glint, "would you like to get involved?"

The rest of the trip is a blur. Suffice it to say that when we arrived back in Williamstown I was not only team-teaching a class called "Culture, Society and Disease" with the president and the dean of the College, but I had also—and I swear I have no idea how this part happened—volunteered to be secretary to the faculty, a position which is way less impressive than it sounds.

The Mort Effect! That's how all this great stuff happened at the College over the last nine years. It's irresistible.

– *Peter Murphy, chair and professor of English*

Last fall the president sent a message to students about the financial crisis' toll on Williams' endowment. The next day, my College Council co-president, Peter Nurnberg '09, and I decided the issue warranted a town-hall meeting in which students could ask questions about the College's financial situation. We e-mailed President Schapiro at 11 p.m. asking if he would lead one. He responded within a half hour saying he would.

At the meeting, not only was he willing to go off script and take questions on a difficult topic, but he was able to reduce the complicated economics of college financing to a 15-minute explanation that was clear, informative and surprisingly entertaining. A friend on the school newspaper warned me that President Schapiro would never share the exact amount the endowment had shrunk with students—let alone with an entire assembly of them. He was wrong. The president gave its current size without a flinch and mollified concerns about how the College would respond. Without a doubt students left that meeting considerably calmer and more assured than when they came.

– *Jeremy Goldstein '09*

When I walked into President Schapiro's office for a tutorial my senior year, little did I know that the next four months would be one of the most defining and pivotal moments of my time at Williams. His probing questions truly challenged me, his thoughtful comments on my writing enriched me, and his interest in my entire experience at Williams was refreshing. He had a flawless memory for the results of my crew race from the weekend before, and he was always eager to know how it was going to go the coming weekend. He valued the education of the whole person, as he encouraged my academic and athletic pursuits with equal enthusiasm. His passion about his subject matter, the economics of higher education, was so infectious that I sought out opportunities after graduation to work in the college endowment investment industry. What I most remember is that during those afternoons in his office it felt as if there was nothing more important to Morty than the paper in front of us and what the four of us were going to learn. And in that way, Morty personified what he loved most about Williams: the power of a professor at one end of a log and a student at the other.

– *Abigail Wattlely '05*