IIFET Mourns Passing of Joel Dirlam

Dr. Joel Dirlam, well known and respected by many in IIFET, passed away recently. The following reminiscence was sent by John Gates of the University of Rhode Island.

Joel was acting Chair in the Economics Dept. when Virgil Norton came to URI from the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries (now NMFS) in the late ’60s. They put together our Ph.D program as a joint program drawn from Economics, Resource Economics and Business, administered by a Graduate Economics Faculty. I was vice Chair and Elton Rayack in Econ. was Chair of the Graduate Econ. Faculty. Joel & Virgil also had joint appointments in both Departments.

Joel was an Industrial Organization economist who later became interested in fisheries and had numerous fisheries projects over the years as well as serving on many student committees. He also served as an advisor to a NOAA fisheries committee and at the time of his death was a member of the Social Sciences Advisory Committee. Dan Georgianna, Phil Logan and I attended the memorial service at the University Club. More than a hundred attended and many spoke eloquently of his activism, from liberal political causes, no matter how hopeless, to saving the historic Kingston Train Station (now doing a lively business, I might add), to befriending “lost” students & faculty from France, Yugoslavia etc. Fred Kahn, a colleague and former head of the Federal Aviation Administration drove over from Ithaca and reminisced of their days in and after graduate school.

My wife and I were good friends with Joel and his wife, Barbara, who passed away about 3 years ago. Joel was 90 years young and still displayed an insatiable curiosity. It was not uncommon to get a call in the evening with a (somewhat odd) question, such as: “What do you know about the Lombard Rate?” After a long pause while I wracked my brain, I replied, “I would expect it had something to do with banking in Northern Italy.” Joel proceeded to give me an outline of financial instruments he was interested in, from that region. He was like that. The night before his death, Jon Sutinen and I visited Joel in his nursing home where he was recovering from heart surgery. We posed a question about macroeconomics and capital flows about which we had been arguing while en route. We left him still pondering the question, but very much intrigued. The next day, my cell phone had a message from him spelling out the issues and the answer. It was the last time I heard his voice.