

Nick Sterling  
November 7, 1934-  
Years as Faculty Master: 1981-1985, 1990-1998

Nicholas Jason Sterling was born and raised in Cooperstown, New York. He had one younger sister. He attended Williams College in Massachusetts where he received his BA in Mathematics and did his graduate work at Syracuse University where he received his PhD in Mathematics. At the time there were not that many opportunities for mathematicians and the reason that he came to Binghamton was because they offered him a job. Nick came to Harpur College in 1966 and began teaching calculus.<sup>1</sup>

Nick's first foray into Hinman College began in 1969. This was at the height of the Vietnam War, and student unrest and activism were at their highest at colleges and universities around the country. SUNY Binghamton was no exception. For approximately three days in 1969, the college completely shut down. Nick happened to be in Hinman at this time and remembers sitting down with the students during the shutdown and talking with them about all kinds of issues from politics, to the university, to just life in general. This incident always stuck with Nick and was the basis for wanting to become involved with Hinman College later on.<sup>2</sup>

In 1981 two Faculty Master positions opened up on the SUNY Binghamton campus. One position was available to replace the outgoing Master of Newing, Bob Pompei, and the other was to replace the outgoing Master of Hinman, Vito Sinisi. Nick wanted to become a Faculty Master and interviewed for both positions. The search committee for a new Faculty Master for Newing College decided that Nick Sterling would not be a good fit for Newing. Shortly thereafter, Nick was offered the job in Hinman. "Nick just related to people and to students in particular. He was passionate about students and that was why," Bob Pompei theorizes, "that's why Nick Sterling was so successful as Faculty Master."<sup>3</sup>

Nick Sterling can be considered the Grover Cleveland of Hinman College. Like the U.S. President (for which Cleveland Hall in Hinman is named), Nick served two nonconsecutive terms as Faculty Master. The first took place in the early 1980's from 1981 until 1985. For four years, Nick Sterling administered Hinman College and continued to teach calculus classes. Nick stepped down from this position 1985. He stepped down at this time because his children were high school seniors and he wanted to spend more time with them. Nick was succeeded by Al Haber in the fall of 1985. However, when Al Haber fell ill, Nick stepped back up to the position of Master in 1990 and stayed in this position for the next eight years.<sup>4</sup> Nick Sterling currently holds the record for the longest serving Faculty Master. He was Master for a total of twelve years.

One of Nick's fondest memories of his time as Master occurred in 1982 when Lisa D'Amato wanted to break the world record for the longest shower. Nick had to pull some strings with the administration to allow it to happen. For days, D'Amato's shower was huge news not only in Hinman but in the local Binghamton community as well.<sup>5</sup> Today it would be almost impossible, liability insurance being what it is, to have something like happen again. However, it was ultimately Nick Sterling who made this event possible and put not only Lisa D'Amato but Hinman College in the record books.

Perhaps Nick Sterling's biggest claim to fame was the lunches that he would have with Hinmanites. Almost everyday, Nick would eat lunch in the Hinman Dining Hall and he would always be surrounded by a cluster of students who were eager to share how their day was and what was going on in their lives. Nick would always come to the table with a huge plate of salad and relished listening to the students tell him about what was going on in their lives. These lunches soon reached a level of infamy for their length. Typically the lunches started at noon

and it would not be unusual for them to run at least two hours or more. It was during this time that Nick and many Hinman students bonded and learned a lot about each other. Nick was always a sympathetic ear and a shoulder to cry on no matter what the issue was. These lunches and the other informal times that he spent with students is just one of the many reasons why Nick Sterling was loved by so many Hinmanites. Nick would have no idea just how important these lunches were to students until years later when many of them would come up to him and tell him that some of their best memories of their time in Hinman and of their whole college experience was these informal lunches.<sup>6</sup>

Having served as Faculty Master for two nonconsecutive terms Nick had the benefit of seeing different generations of students and professional staff pass through Hinman College. Maria Carra, the Assistant Coordinator of Hinman in the early 1980's, says that her favorite memories of her time in Hinman involved Nick. Though Nick was rather quiet and low-key, he was really a wonderful when you got to know him. She loved the fact that he took extra efforts to know each student who passed his way and to try and mentor them if he could.<sup>7</sup>

Nick's tenure of Faculty Master saw the important 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of Hinman College in 1992. Jeff Horowitz, who was Financial Vice President of Hinman College at the time of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, remembers all of the rigmarole and the mountains of paperwork they had to fill out in order to bring fireworks to campus. All their efforts were not lost, however, and the Hinman College 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary was the first event ever on the Binghamton University campus to have a fireworks display. The 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary also saw the dedication of a time capsule which is supposedly located somewhere in the Hinman Library and is to be opened on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Hinman College in 2017. Jeff was a Math major, and though he never took a course with Nick Sterling, Nick did act as his advisor. What Jeff loved

about Nick was the way he interacted with students. Nick also had some peculiarities that made him loveable. Nick always came to HCC meetings (which then, as now, are known for being very long) with his own chair so he wouldn't have to sit on the floor. Nick also had an amazing memory. He remembered almost everyone's name that he met. Nick also invited many Hinmanites over to his house for dinner on multiple occasions.<sup>8</sup>

Kristin Graffagino remembers her time in Hinman and her interactions with Nick Sterling very fondly. She too remembers fondly the marathon lunches that Nick would have in the dining hall. Years later she would reminisce,

Nick was the greatest. He was like one of the kids. I'll always remember the massive lunches which would sometimes run between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. in the Hinman Dining Hall. Nick would always be there, eating with the rest of the students. He was present at every HCC meeting and was just an all around great guy. He was passionate about his work. I'll always remember how he would pull me aside to talk to me and he was my advisor and mentor during my time in Binghamton.<sup>9</sup>

Brent Landau also fondly remembers his interactions with Nick Sterling. He remembers specifically making sure his class schedule was free between noon and 2 p.m. so that he could have lunch with Nick. He also remembers Nick's intense interest in students and his involvement with them and their activities. When Nick finally retired in 1998, a large surprise retirement party/dinner was held in his honor in the Hinman Dining Hall. Brent along with Brian Haggerty would film this event for posterity. The video is still on file in the Hinman archives and is an amazing testament to the persona of Nick Sterling and the mark that he left on Hinman. For well over two hours, a parade of individuals came forward to speak about how much Nick had meant to them and how he touched their lives. This video is truly a testament to how universally loved and admired Nick Sterling was.<sup>10</sup>

Nick Sterling truly believed in mentoring students and giving them the resources that they needed to succeed. It was Nick Sterling who assured the university administration that Lisa

D'Amato could break the world record for the longest shower and that it would not be too risky for the university. Nick Sterling was also responsible for helping to create Binghamton University's most successful acapella groups. One day in 1983, Nick and the Coordinator of Hinman College at the time were walking by the Hinman Quad and overheard two young men talking about starting an acapella group. All they needed was a little encouragement, and Nick encouraged them to do so. These men went on to form the Binghamton Crosbys, who would win the International A Capella Championship in 2003. Over the course of their career they would go to the finals a total of four times, a record for the International Championship of College A Capella. Years later Nick Sterling would remember that first moment meeting those two young men and say, "That was really the kind of thing that could happen. It was kind of serendipitous. There was so much talent and creativity amongst students that there was always that kind of opportunity. That's part of your role [as Faculty Master] — to encourage it."<sup>11</sup>

Shortly after he retired from the Mastership of Hinman College, Nick Sterling was interviewed for an article in *Inside BU* and there he spoke about what it means to be a Faculty Master at Binghamton University. He said,

I think the main thing is that you are an advocate for the students. You are partly a role model, you're also a leader, you're a person who is there for them and who is there to mediate between them and other forces of the University. I think you are there to encourage the creativity that the students naturally have. And that's a big part of the position as well as working with the student government and the RA staff and the RD staff and with the assistant director in those kinds of activities.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1997-1998 *Dynamo*, Nick wrote one a farewell address to Hinman College, the place where he spent so much of his time while in Binghamton. He wrote:

It's hard to believe that I've been Faculty Master of Hinman for 12 years, over a third of my tenure at Binghamton. It has been an extraordinarily rich adventure. I am grateful and honored to have been able to share your lives and those of the generations of students who have preceded you. Hinman is the greatest, and you're the ones who make it so!

Enthusiasm, dedication, creativity, tenacity, and great sense of community make this a very special place.

Some folks at Binghamton complain about the lack of “spirit” and the apathy at BU. I invite them to come to Hinman and see what true spirit is: a college council which has 8% of our population as active, engaged members; our Co-Rec teams; Dorm Wars and Hysteria; Rockefeller Room and Bus Stop; our Semi-Formal; HPC; our volunteer and carnival rides; Bandemonium; our great RA and RD staffs and E-Boards; Tamara [Clark]; the office staff; RLA’s; Fellows and Student Fellows. And on and on. What makes it all come together to make the sum greater than its parts is the willingness of all the constituencies of Hinman to work together as a true community.<sup>13</sup>

For this project Nick Sterling would comment on his time in Hinman and some of his favorite memories of his time in Hinman.

It’s hard to pick out any one memory. Everything was just so interesting. It was outstanding to get out of the Lecture Hall and into the community. It was a different life experience. There I could be friends with the students. In the Lecture Hall I was always Professor Sterling, but in Hinman I was Nick. I treasured that kind of experience. It’s a very warm relationship that you have in the residence halls.<sup>14</sup>

These brief quotations from the people who interacted with him scarcely do the man justice. Nick Sterling was a tremendous presence in Hinman College, a presence that spanned two different decades. He was also a man who cared very deeply and affectionately about his students and especially about Hinmanites. Of all the Faculty Masters of Hinman College, it is Nick Sterling who holds an extra special and significant place of honor. While he may not have pioneered areas as previous Masters or offered many innovations to the position, the mentoring relationship that he had with his students has stood the test of time and is truly the definition by which all other Faculty Masters, regardless of which residential college they are in, judge themselves by.

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Sterling, telephone conversation with author, May 9, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Sterling, “Hinman History,” *Stories of Hinman College*, May 6, 2000 and Nick Sterling, telephone conversation with author, May 9, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Pompei, interview with author, February 1, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Nick Sterling, telephone conversation with author, May 9, 2007.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Maria Carra, interview with author, January 26, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Horowitz, interview with author, November 13, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Kristin Graffagno, telephone conversation with author, January 29, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Brent Landau, telephone conversation with author

<sup>11</sup> Sharon Scher, "Faculty Masters help break down classroom walls," *Inside BU*, November-December 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Nick Sterling, "A Final Word From Nick Sterling," *Dynamo* 1997-1998, on file in the Hinman Archives.

<sup>14</sup> Nick Sterling, telephone conversation with author, May 9, 2007.