

Vito F. Sinisi
1924-2005
Years as Faculty Master: 1973-1981

Vito F. Sinisi was born in Los Angeles in 1924. During World War II he served with the U.S. Army in Germany. During the war he learned the Japanese language. Among other languages he was fluent in English, Italian, Polish and read French and some German. After the war he attended Harvard University on the G.I. Bill where he received his BA in 1950. He went on to receive his master's degree from the University of California Berkeley in 1954 and his PhD in Philosophy in 1959, also from Berkley. He came to Binghamton in 1966 where he would teach until his retirement in 2004, focusing mostly on mathematical and social logic. He would go on to chair the department on two separate occasions, the first time between 1968 and 1971 and the second time between the years 1989 and 1990. He was the author of the book *Applied Logic*, and the editor of *The Heritage of Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz*, both which focused on a special type of logic developed in Poland, which would cause him to be the butt of many politically incorrect jokes throughout his time teaching the subject. Throughout his time at Binghamton, Sinisi would teach both logic and social philosophy courses. He was married to Jeanette Sinisi and they had one daughter, Rosaria.¹

Between the years 1973 and 1981, when he was Faculty Master of Hinman College, Vito made his most profound impact upon students. In the Spring of 1973, when outgoing Faculty Master Pete Gruber decided to leave the Mastership to pursue a position as assistant to the President, many candidates were interviewed by a panel of students and professional staff. One of the people interviewing candidates was Bob Giomi. Bob was hired by Pete Gruber and had a very close relationship with him. At the time of interviewing him, Bob felt that Sinisi was not the best candidate for the position. As a result he was a little apprehensive when he found out

that Sinisi had been selected as Gruber's successor. However, those fears soon vanished when Bob saw just how amazing Vito was with the students of Hinman. Though both Bob and Sinisi were hot-blooded Italian-Americans and sparred on occasion, they had a great deal of respect for one another and even grew to love another with as much affection as a father may have for a son. Though Bob would leave Hinman College in 1978 to pursue a job at Whittier College in California and eventually take a position with UC Berkley (Sinisi's alma mater) the two of them would remain close for years afterwards.²

Perhaps Sinisi's most significant contribution to Hinman College and all of the residential colleges at SUNY Binghamton was his efforts to preserve collegiate structure. Sinisi would chair the Task Force for the Academic Development of the Collegiate Units which would battle a university administration that wanted to centralize all of the residential colleges at Binghamton. His tenacious fighting spirit earned him the nickname "Don Vito," after Don Corleone of *The Godfather* films. Although in the end the colleges would be centralized under a central Residential Life department and would have to answer to the Director of Residential Life (as opposed to the individual Masters as it was before), his efforts still helped to preserve some autonomy among the individual residential colleges.*

Although fighting to preserve collegiate structure was perhaps Sinisi's most tangible contribution, he played such a significant role in the lives of so many students. Sinisi was a huge fan and supporter of the Hinman Little Theater (HLT). When HLT staged *Play It Again, Sam* Bob Giomi and Gabe Yankowitz wrote in a four line part for him. In a scene that took place at a disco, Sinisi played the part of a waiter. Across the front of his shirt it read, "Vito's Pizzeria." Although he only had a few short lines he would rehearse them for hours on end before the start of the play to make sure he got them right. During the play when he entered the scene and

* For more information on this subject see the chapter on preserving collegiate structure.

uttered his now famous line, “That is some spicy pizza,” it brought the house down. Even though future television and movie star Paul Reiser would act in the play, it was Vito Sinisi who stole the show and the hearts of everyone who saw it.³

Vito Sinisi would also have a profound impact upon many students in Hinman College. Eric Pomerantz, an active Hinmanite who would be HCC President from 1977-1979, remembers Vito fondly. Over twenty-five years after having been mentored by Vito, Eric would remember him this way:

He was such a wonderful guy...He was devoted to his students in Hinman. You could go into his office anytime and talk to him. He was my advisor when I was on the E-Board and talked about a lot. I remember talking to him about the quota system for minorities that was getting a lot of attention at that time and its implications for higher education. He came to all the activities in Hinman both on the weekdays and on the weekends. I got tremendous enjoyment from him being Master. He even later went on to write me a recommendation...I'll always remember Hinman Commencement. It was in the Fine Arts building and Vito was there and he shook my hand. Hundreds of people came to Hinman Commencement. It was very important to them and having Vito there was a big part of that.⁴

Once President of Smith Hall, Fred Silverman also has fond memories of Vito Sinisi. At that time the food in the dining hall had a reputation for being almost inedible. However, there was a Chinese man, the proprietor of a local Chinese restaurant, who would come to campus and sell some of his wares in the residence halls. He would go around from room to room and sell his food to hungry Hinmanites who were fed up with the selections offered in the dining hall. However, when ACE, the company in charge of campus dining services, caught wind of this, they banned him from selling his products in the residence halls. They claimed that he was undercutting their profits. Fred and others met with ACE and fought to allow the man to continue coming into the residence halls to sell his food. Vito was present during one of these meetings.

I remember when we were meeting with ACE to go over the situation and Vito was there. I was amazed that he actually backed us up. He wasn't your typical college professor. He was a really nice guy and very low-key. He had such a curiosity about students and wanted to know more about them, their hopes, dreams, and concerns. He was very involved, more than any other professor that I knew. I'll never forget him backing us up on the Chinese food issue.⁵

Jim Greenlees, President of HCC from 1980-1981, also has fond memories of his time with Vito Sinisi.

Vito was one of the nicest, gentlest people I've ever met. I never took a philosophy class with him, but worked with him for 3 1/2 years. Vito was always available to talk, give advice, etc. He attended all the major events (Follies, Co-Rec playoffs, etc.) Where the graduate dorms now stand (behind Hinman, between the commuter lot and the Nature Preserve) used to be called (I believe unofficially) Sinisi Park, in his honor. I remember my sophomore year, there was talk of replacing him, as he'd been Master for close to 10 years. My RA, Bob Mancini, started a campaign to keep Vito on. If you have access to the 1978-1979 Hinman *Dynamo*, there's a picture of Bob with "Save Vito" signs pasted all over his jacket.⁶

Vito was a popular Faculty Master. Sinisi Park would become akin to Hinman what Lake Lieberman was to Newing. Sinisi Park was a place where students could go and play sports, have picnics and basically just do anything fun out in the sun. Although the area was never officially sanctioned as Sinisi Park by the university, to this day whenever a student needs to rent out the fire pit in that area, they have to fill out a permit which designates that the area as Sinisi Park, so there is some official recognition. Unfortunately, most of Sinisi Park is now a parking lot, but the memory of it still remains in the minds of many Hinmanites from that era.

Steven "Pudge" Meyer also remembers his time with Vito Sinisi fondly and the mentor-mentee relationship that they had. It was Vito who encouraged Pudge to run for HCC. Pudge followed his advice and became HCC Secretary (a position now known as Public Affairs Vice President) from 1979-1980. The relationship they would have would be profound and continue long after Pudge's tenure on the HCC E-Board. Pudge would single-handedly write the *Hinman Halitosis*, mostly because Vito asked him to. The two of them would also co-star in minor roles

in the HPC production of *Hot L Baltimore*. Here these two Hinman mainstays would steal the show and completely bring down the house around them. Over twenty-five years later Pudge would write, “Like everyone else says, Vito’s walk-on was a classic. Since I had known him as well as I did, it only reinforced for me that he took the most joy from being surrounded by students. Vito was not a young man; he wore hats that my dad wore. But he had a vitality that was even more apparent when he was connecting with students.”⁷ When it came time for Hinman graduation in 1981 there was a lot of competition for Den of Distinction Awards and the Harvey D. Hinman Award, Hinman College’s highest honor. When the awards were handed out Jim Greenlees won the Harvey D. Hinman Award and Pudge would receive a Den of Distinction Award. However, Vito handed out the last Den of Distinction Award, the final award to be given out that evening, to Pudge and spoke highly and kindly of him and of his passionate involvement in Hinman. To this day Pudge Meyer still remembers that moment at Hinman Commencement. Though he did not win the highest award, Vito saved him for last.

Diane Castiglione (Fischer) was HCC President after Jim Greenlees and was also highly inspired by Vito Sinisi. Working with her on a daily basis, Vito Sinisi inspired her to always question authority and never be afraid to ask questions and to challenge the status quo. He taught her speak her mind and to always voice her opinion, regardless of what others may think. Diane Castiglione would say herself, “He [Vito] helped me find my path. I came into my own at SUNY Binghamton and Hinman and lot of that was influenced by Vito. He treated us with respect and treated us like peers. Our [HCC] E-board meetings were fun and casual and we got a lot done.”⁸ Twenty-five years after she had graduated from Binghamton, earning her master’s degree and working for the US State Department, she still remembers what Vito Sinisi taught and inspired her. Although it is hard to put into written words, this author can honestly say,

simply from the tone of her voice and her descriptions of her day-to-day encounters with Vito Sinisi, that he was more than just an ordinary college professor for her, that he was nothing less than a father figure.

Vito would step down from the Faculty Master position in the Spring of 1981 and Nick Sterling would begin the first of his two nonconsecutive terms as Master of Hinman College. However, no one could replace Vito and his legacy. Vito would continue to teach at Binghamton until 2004 when he finally retired. His career as an educator would last for a total of thirty-eight years. On December 27, 2005, he died from multiple myeloma, a cancer of the plasma cell at the age of 81.⁹

Vito Sinisi left a long-lasting legacy at SUNY Binghamton and especially in Hinman College. From listening to others speak about him and reading what others remember of him, it is quite apparent that he had a tremendous positive influence over a generation of Hinmanites. Although he may not have been as influential in pioneering areas of Hinman College as his predecessor Pete Gruber was, Vito had his own contributions. From fighting to preserve collegiate structure at SUNY Binghamton to mentoring and inspiring countless students, Vito Sinisi left a lasting legacy in Hinman that deserves more than just a simple park named after him. Vito Sinisi set the precedent for Faculty Master involvement and mentorship that would be followed by every other Hinman College Faculty Master that would come after him. Although Vito was passionate about the subject he taught, it is apparent that the thing that he was most passionate about was Hinman College and the students who lived within its bounds. At the time of his death, his daughter, Rosaria Sinisi is quoted as saying, “He just tried to spend as much time with students as he could.”¹⁰ To the members of the Task Force for the Academic Development of the Collegiate Units who saw him as the cunning “Don Vito,” to the students

who saw him not as a mafia Godfather, but as a kind and caring father-figure with no mob connections, to fellow Italian-American Bob Giomi, who saw him as a friend, Vito Sinisi was and continues to be one of the most admired and loved Faculty Masters in Hinman history.

¹ “Longtime BU Philosophy Professor Dies,” *Inside BU* Vol. 27, No. 15, January 19, 2006 and “Professor Retires After 38 Years,” *Philosophy/Philosophy, Politics and Law Newsletter*, Binghamton University, Issue 2.

² Bob Giomi, telephone conversation with author, November 29, 2006.

³ Bob Giomi, e-mail message to author, May 2, 2007.

⁴ Eric Pomerantz, telephone conversation with author, December 28, 2006.

⁵ Fred Silverman, interview with author, May 5, 2006.

⁶ Jim Greenlees, e-mail message to author, February 3, 2007.

⁷ Steven Meyer, e-mail message to author, March 18, 2007.

⁸ Diane Castiglione, telephone conversation with author, February 2, 2007.

⁹ “Longtime BU Philosophy Professor Dies,” *Inside BU* Vol. 27, No. 15, January 19, 2006.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*