Albert J. LaValley ("Al") died on Tuesday, April 11, 2023, in Noble Oklahoma at the age of 87. A friend recalled a joke about him that reflects how widely he was known and beloved. A huge crowd is gathered in St. Peter’s square and Al and the Pope come out on the balcony. One of the onlookers elbows his friend and asked, “Who is the guy with Al?”

He was born on July 8, 1935, in Springfield, MA, where, even as a boy, he would spend free time after school at the movies. In high school, he would hang out at the local papers, The Springfield Daily News and The Springfield Union, talking about movies with the papers’ film reviewers. In the late 1950s there was a coffee house in Springfield where he went to hear groups like the Weavers and learned from their music the importance of having something worthwhile to say in your art, your music, in your life.

He attended college at Holy Cross, in Worcester, MA, receiving a BA in English in 1957. He then earned an MA and Ph.D. in English from Yale University where he also taught a variety of literature courses (on James Joyce, William Wordsworth, Shakespeare, and Chaucer) between 1961-67. He was particularly proud of a large lecture course he developed in Literary Modernism that involved philosophical writings by such figures as Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, as well as literature. Al’s literary background resulted in three important books, Carlyle and the Idea of the Modern with Yale University Press in 1968, a critical edition of Thomas Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles in 1969, and The New Consciousness: An Anthology of the New Literature in 1972.

Film was just gaining a foothold as an academic discipline, so Al’s early teaching after Yale was as an Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at San Francisco State University between 1967-69. He taught his first film class, an “Introduction to Film,” at Rutgers University between 1969-71. It was also at Rutgers that he taught one of the first undergraduate classes in this country on gay literature. Then, as a Visiting Professor of Film Studies at UC Santa Barbara between 1971-75, and again between 1982-84, he developed many of the film courses he continued to teach throughout his long and illustrious career, on Weimar film, science fiction film (a large lecture class), and on auteurs such as Hitchcock, Murnau, Lang, and Kubrick. Just days before he died, when a friend asked him what he would most like to teach, he didn’t hesitate and said it would be on Martin Scorsese with Mean Streets as the introduction. Also, while Al was at Santa Barbara, because of the proximity to Hollywood, he brought and hosted many distinguished visitors, including Frank Capra, King Vidor, Robert Altman, and indeed, the just mentioned Scorsese.

Al followed his initial teaching tenure at Santa Barbara by moving to San Francisco and founding and running “The Limelight Bookstore” (1975-81), of which he was always proud. The bookstore specialized in works about film and theater and became a center for gay and anti-war activism during the turbulent ’70s. Al recalls being arrested a couple of times, once for a Vietnam protest when he was jailed with Joan Baez, and another time when students and faculty at San Francisco State went on strike against Governor Reagan. He remembered this time as “intellectually stimulating.” He was an activist all his life. A colleague described him as “a staunch defender of freedom of speech, deeply immersed in both politics and art.”

He was one of the first American film scholars to edit a book about Alfred Hitchcock (Focus on Hitchcock, 1972), and he followed this with books on Mildred Pierce (1980), The Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1989), and Eisenstein at 100 (with Barry Scherr, 2001), and many essays on such subjects as film noir, melodrama, horror, and the Russian avant-garde. He
is considered one of the key early writers in queer criticism, along with Robin Wood and Richard Dyer, and the article he wrote for *American Film* in April of 1985, “The Great Escape,” reprinted in *Out in Culture* (1995) edited by Cory Creekmur and Alexander Doty, remains an influential text in LGBT+ studies.

Al’s activism is also reflected in the film he made with Mark Decker, *A Time of Change: Confronting AIDS* (1986). Al and Mark met at the first Los Angeles gay and lesbian film festival in 1982 and became lifelong friends. Their seminal documentary was only the second ever made about AIDS and features interviews conducted with early AIDS patients at San Francisco General Hospital.” For decades it was (and may still be) used in university classes on death and dying, the emergence of the concept of “family,” and taking care of one’s own in the gay community. Mark says that “Al was as proud of that film as any of his academic writings.”

Following his second stint at Santa Barbara, Al was hired as a professor of Film Studies at Dartmouth College where, as Chairman, he oversaw the separation of Film Studies from Drama to become a department on its own and was responsible for hiring its early outstanding faculty, many of whom are still there. He also taught all the basic film courses, team-taught many others, including innovative classes in women’s studies and comparative literature. One colleague found Al “an endless source of fascinating and rare information about directors, actors, producers, and the mechanics of Hollywood,” and another, who developed and team-taught a course on American independent cinema with him, said “the best part was watching how Al taught, and absorbing his depth and breadth of independent film history. I’m sure I learned more than any of our students.”

He retired from Dartmouth in 1998, but continued teaching and giving lectures as an emeritus at Dartmouth, Santa Barbara, and the University of Oklahoma. His encyclopedic mind was ever active, engaging in lively discussions about film with friends and colleagues, and, up until his death, writing an extensive study of filmmakers who worked in Mexico during the 1930s-1950s, including Sergei Eisenstein, Luis Buñuel, and Norman Foster.

But with his passing, friends and colleagues more than anything, miss his kindness, humility, and wonderful, infectious laugh. His generosity in so many ways was legendary and limitless. His friend Mark Decker says that the two words that come to mind when thinking about Al are simply: “generosity and joy.” The administrative assistant for Film Studies at Dartmouth echoes those words: he was a “joyful person” with a passion for film who loved to travel, loved his work, and would often bring her flowers. Another friend commented, “He had a wonderful vitality of mind and spirit,” taking “real pleasure in the adventure of life. . . He seemed both spontaneous and considered, both restless and rooted, both worldly and hopeful, unafraid of change.” Few people knew he was also a “serious birder” who could identify the calls when he came by to visit. However, he was better known as a “gracious host” who brought people together effortlessly. For one friend, “It always felt like a delightful privilege to be in his company,” and that included many of “boisterous” dinners, “filled with wonderful conversation (and, often, passionate arguments) and great food - or not so great food, didn’t matter.” Dining with Al, as another friend said, “was always a joyous affair,” and “he seemed to bring out the best in us.” So much to be missed; so much to be grateful for. We are lucky to have shared this life with Al.

Should you so desire, contributions can be made to Dartmouth College, Hanover NH for use by the Film & Media Studies Department to support projects to commemorate Albert
LaValley. Contributions can be made online at https://dartgo.org/albertlavalley or by check to: Dartmouth College, Gift Recording Office, 6066 Development Office, Hanover, NH 03755-4400. Please include with the check “Projects to commemorate Albert LaValley.”