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The Last Page

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ben ling's life

By Sandy Maisel

Ben Ling '98 and Sandy Maisel at The Broken Spoke Saloon in Austin, Texas, where they saw their favorite country musician, Jerry Jeff Walker, perform. Maisel describes Ling in Walker's words: "contrary to ordinary."



Editor's note: Ben Ling '98 passed away March 17, following a battle with cancer. Ling, who graduated magna cum laude with honors in government, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and to Pi Sigma Alpha, the political science honor society.

Few students in my more than three decades at Colby have affected me as did Ben Ling. I remember so clearly the skinny kid from Houston, complete with cowboy boots and a black cowboy hat, who led the discussion in my Government 111 class in the fall of 1994. Ben was the linchpin for a group of students who stayed together—as friends and many of them as government majors—throughout their Colby careers.

Ben's friends will remember him for many reasons. Three stand out to me and will be familiar to all who knew him. First, Ben lived the words of an old song by Jerry Jeff Walker, Ben's favorite country singer and mine. Ben was "contrary to ordinary." He did things his own way—and his friends learned to enjoy them. Unlike mine, his cowboy hat and boots were genuine; he was Texan and proud of it. He loved the out-of-doors and he loved the West. His junior year "abroad" was to Kansas State, and he convinced the Biology Department that he could fulfill his natural science requirement with courses in agronomy. He and his friend Chris Coakley '98 had the only snowmobile parked in the Williams lot during their senior year. And he did love country music. Not that loud, modern country but traditional West Texas country. He shared these passions with his friends, and they too learned to appreciate wonderful things that

were contrary to Colby ordinary, lessons they will long remember.

Second, Ben was fiercely smart and intellectual. He read constantly and remembered and thought about everything he read. His comments in class always made classmates take notice and think, "Why didn't I see that?" Ben and his wonderful friend Lizzie Ivry '98 were my research-assistant team for three and a half years. As a research assistant, Ben contributed to my projects in important ways: raising questions, seeing connections, thinking of new approaches. I tried so hard to convince him to go on for a Ph.D., because he would have been a terrific professor. But Ben wanted to go into policy work, to help with agriculture and farm policy. Of course, Ben did not follow the normal route. During a semester in Washington he worked on grazing fee policy—an obscure specialty to be sure. He became an expert, and other experts in Washington continued to consult him after he returned to Colby for his senior year. When he graduated, Ben's first job was working as a ranch hand. He loved that life and he wanted to learn on the ground how policy affected ranchers and farmers. At the time of his death he was a legislative assistant on agriculture policy for Sen. Mike Enzi (R-Wyo.). His approach there was intellectual as well as practical. During my last two visits with Ben, while he was fighting cancer, we debated a favorite policy issue, comparing practical and philosophical approaches to solving it. Ben knew the importance of both political considerations and justice.

But I remember Ben most for the depth of his friendship. He taught me more about seeing different sides of people and honoring all of them than has any other student. I hope and think I am a better professor, a better parent and a better friend because of lessons I learned from Ben. He drew around him an incredibly diverse group of friends. During his final illness, he had visitors from all over the country. The administrators in the hospital said that no other patient had had so many people fly in from so many different places: Colby friends, Washington friends, Texas friends, Kansas friends. Literally dozens of people came together with nothing in common except for having been touched by and having loved this remarkable young man. And in all of our sorrow over Ben's illness, we marveled at his courage and at our good fortune in knowing him and in meeting each other through him.

We all gain so much by being part of the Colby family. Those of us who knew Ben Ling will always consider our time with him one of Colby's greatest gifts to us. Those who didn't can learn as well from the terrible loss we feel—by thinking of the friends they are meeting or have met on Mayflower Hill, by honoring those friendships and by building on them. Like nothing else, the loss of an extraordinary friend—or a contrary-to-ordinary one—in the fullness of youth clarifies what is important: Time with good friends should be precious to all of us.

—Sandy Maisel is the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Government