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Yale professor recalled as brilliant economist, loving family man

By Randall Beach Updated 8:19 pm EDT, Sunday, September 2, 2018



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Yale School of Management economics Professor Martin Shubik.

NEW HAVEN — Martin Shubik, a Yale School of Management economics professor who in the 1960s predicted “computing machines” would be commonly used in households before the end of the 20th century, is being remembered by his family as a man with many passionate interests and talents.

Shubik, 92, died recently at his home in Branford after struggling for approximately 20 years with the effects of inclusion body myositis, a disease that destroys muscles.

Shubik's wife, Julie Shubik, said his reaction to being diagnosed illustrated his keen interest in many topics.

"When he found out he had this rare disease, he started a data base at Yale for the disease and he funded research into it," she said. "There is no cure."

Shubik was also a pioneer in applying game theory to our lives. In addition, his wife noted, he took on subjects that included football strategy and conducting a blind taste test of four New York City delicatessens to decide which had the best sandwiches. Shubik partnered with Albert Madansky of the University of Chicago on that test.

"He was passionate about pastrami sandwiches," Julie Shubik said. "He was also a passionate Chinese chef. We gave Chinese banquets at our house by Edgerton Park," the public space that straddles the border of New Haven and Hamden.

She recalled he was "one of the first to use a computer at Princeton." He studied there with other future notables in mathematics, including John Nash, who would go on to be a Nobel laureate.

Shubik joined the Yale faculty in 1963. He directed the Cowles Foundation for Research in Economics from 1973-76. It was in 1976 that he and other faculty members founded the Yale School of Management (at that time called the Yale School of Organization and Management).

Shubik taught courses in economics, game theory and investment theory and practice.

Shubik's daughter, Claire Shubik-Richards, said, "When he taught, he told great stories. He was very animated. His students enjoyed him."

Shubik-Richards added, "My father loved life and was passionate about art, music, food, gardens and paintings. But when it came to his own appearance, he didn't care. His students had a game: guessing when he was going to change his sweater. He would only do that when my mother put out a new one for him."

When asked about this, his wife remarked he had a collection of sweaters, one of which she particularly remembers. "He has a white Irish fisherman's sweater with spots on it. It was hard to get it off of him."

Shubik-Richards said he didn't like to change the cars he owned either. "He drove around New Haven for all of the '70s and most of the '80s in this Volkswagen that had a big dent above the right front tire. Here was this huge hulking man, 6 feet, 3 inches tall, driving around in this tiny beetle."

Overall she recalled him as being "a devoted, loving, creative, fun father. He was also a really loving husband."

When she was a little girl, she said, "I dressed up as a fairy and he would put on a fairy crown and wings and be a fairy with me: a tall man in a fairy suit!"

Shubik-Richards, who is an attorney and director of the Pennsylvania Prison Society advocating prison reform, added: "He told me it didn't matter what I did; I could be a garbage collector or a ballerina, as long as I strove to be the best. That was a guiding principle in his life. He placed no value judgement on what you did. The emphasis was on doing something you could be passionate about. My father had a spark and a passion."

She said her father never hesitated to take on "random projects" that he found interesting. He advised the Naval War College on nuclear war games and was one of the founders of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Mass.

One of Shubik's colleagues, Shyam Sunder, the James L. Frank Professor at the Yale School of Management, conducted research on many topics with him.

"The most remarkable thing about him was his creativity and work ethic," Sunder said. "His work ethic could put people half his age to shame!"

Sunder added, "He was always thinking about how to leave a better world behind him. That's what drove his research and his life's work."

"His main contribution was what he called mathematical institutional economics," Sunder noted. "He said we should be able to understand how money works in society, how money is controlled...so it doesn't go out of control."

Shubik's wife said, "Right up to the week before he died, he was still discussing theories with the professors who visited. His enthusiasm never diminished."

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