Tribute to Ed and Bette Brohel 9-17-13
By E. Thomas Moran, Ph.D.

It is striking to look back over the last 35 years since Ed and Bette arrived in Plattsburgh and to consider the changes they helped usher into the life of the college.

It was Bette and I who first worked together and became close friends. We shared an office complex when she was employed to coordinate the student volunteer program for the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid. It was a massive undertaking. Thanks in large part to her efforts the student volunteer project, like the Olympic Games, was a huge success.

She then went on to devote her attention to the adult student advising program on the campus and to establish a very active and prominent adult student honor society.
But it is perhaps in her shared leadership with Ed in the cultural life of the college that she has made her greatest contribution.

In 1978 when they arrived, this was, aesthetically speaking, a sterile campus. Our galleries and collections were undeveloped and underutilized. Much of the new architecture was cold and austere. And Ed described Hawkins Hall as reminding him of a high school in Jackson Heights, Queens.

Nevertheless, some people at the college seemed content to hire a director of the galleries, who was expected to be little more than a glorified picture hanger; which is no doubt why during his interview Ed was actually taken to dinner at *McDonald's*.

However, then President Joe Burke and his wife Joan had a passionate commitment to excellence in the arts. They engendered a new vitality.
Over time, Ed, especially, conceived and implemented a vision that transformed the college. Through the concept of “a museum without walls,” we now have a stunning collection of art, openly shared, with everyone who steps foot on the campus; the architecture has been softened and humanized; we have beautiful galleries that display world class work; and a sculpture park that graces the entire center of the campus.

What college anywhere can make such a claim?

Many great universities are characterized by masterful architecture, but works of art on those campuses are invariably confined to limited settings. I know this may seem like an extravagant claim but it is hard for me to recall a campus with more visible works of art than ours; not at least, since Aristotle established his Lyceum of Higher Learning ancient Athens.
If 40 years ago anyone had suggested that we should place art work all over the campus almost everyone would have reacted with derisive skepticism. They would have said, “It will be stolen or defaced or taken as trophies to frat houses.” But that has not happened, -- not even once. This is itself a powerful commentary on the kind of place we are.

Ed has always been captivated by the human heritage of beautiful creations. He has also been fascinated by the ideas and settings that give rise to those creations. For him, these are all entwined in what Lionel Trilling called “the bloody crossroads, where art and politics meet”.

That crossroads is the axis of History, and since his youth it has gripped Ed’s attention. He has an abiding passion for History. His allusions to it are astute and
knowledgeable. And his understanding of History deepens his appreciation of art.

To Ed, art should inform us, delight us, inspire us, and perhaps scare us-- it can even annoy us. But it should never be treated simply as decoration or the mere simulation of life. It is the very stuff of life.

He seems to feel that we should respond to art as we do to another human being, or a compelling idea, or to moonlight, or rain. It should be a vital presence in our world; a dynamic life force—an expression of Eros or Thanatos.

He believes that art is serious, but it should not be ponderous, and it should never be boring. In fact, for Ed the designation “interesting” is the gateway word to any significant discussion about a piece of art.

Of course, he revels in sharing art with others. But he is no artistic populist. He once said to me, with an arched
eyebrow, “I don’t want people stopping by the galleries at lunch-time just to eat a tuna sandwich.”

He also didn't always seem to care if we liked the art that he so energetically presented to us. But he cared that we reacted to it --preferably with passion. I think he got a kick out of knowing that at Plattsburgh arguments about art just might lead to a fistfight.

In the end, though, he created everywhere on our campus little grottos of beauty and contemplation.

Together Ed and Bette have been central figures in creating a gracious, intelligent, inviting college community. Their efforts have given our college genuine distinction and amplified the ideal of what a campus should be.

And for this we offer our profound gratitude.