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David Carr's gruff exterior belied 'big softy' for BU students

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AP/FILE

David Carr

By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 13, 2015

David Carr, who had overcome cancer and drug addiction, was known for his brutal honesty and for being brash at times.

But Carr's students in Boston University's journalism program said they quickly discovered he had a gentler, nurturing side that made him a strong advocate for them and their work.

"He was a big softy at heart," recalled Mikaela Lefrak, who worked for nearly a year as a BU teaching assistant to Carr, the New York Times columnist who died at age 58 Thursday night.

On the outside, "He was scary and gruff," said Lefrak, 26, who grew emotional as she recalled time she spent with Carr en route to finishing her master's studies in December. "He had a crusty

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exterior — he literally always had crumbs around his mouth — but very close under the surface he was the sweetest guy.”

Those who took Carr's first course at BU in the fall, and others enrolled in his class this semester, described him as remarkably approachable and down to earth, which shocked many students who had for years idolized him and his writing from afar.



David Carr on teaching, journalism

The New York Times media columnist spoke with the Globe in what may have been his last interview before his death.

Former student remembers Carr

Columnist David Carr dies at 58

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“He made everyone feel important and special,” said Emily Overholt, a reporter at The Ledger-Enquirer in Columbus, Ga., who graduated from BU in December. “Little people felt big when we were talking to him.”

She said that a few weeks into Carr's course, she stopped by his office to tell him she was worried the

assignments she was handing in weren't up to par.

"I was shaking like a leaf," Overholt. "He just said to me, 'It's OK; we all hate our own work. I do, too.' "

Students said Carr stumbled at times as he adapted to teaching.

"It was a learning experience for all of us. There were some ups and downs," recalled Jamie Bologna, a freelance producer at WBUR's Radio Boston program who graduated from BU last semester. "In the beginning, he had so much to tell us, he was so excited to teach us, and it was just a lot.

"And then he learned the value of asking us questions and having us push back at him," Bologna added.

Carr picked up on another valuable teaching tool.

During a public talk at BU, former Times editor Jill Abramson described to Carr how she regularly brought snacks to students she taught at Harvard, a practice Carr had not adopted.

So Carr began regularly bringing food to classes and one-on-one meetings.

Feeding his students did not come entirely naturally. His snack selection included cookies, chips, doughnuts, and a supply of jelly beans that he kept in his office.

"He brought the kind of snacks your dad would put in your lunch box because your mom was out of town," Lefrak said.

But, much like his determined quest to hone his teaching skills, Carr was committed to seeing the snack experiment become a success.

Bologna remembered meeting with Carr and another student at a coffee shop. Carr brought a batch of mini cupcakes with him, which sat on the table untouched until the professor burst.

"Finally, he said, 'If you guys don't eat these [expletive] cupcakes,' " Bologna said.

Brooke Jackson-Glidden, 20, a junior at BU, said Carr was an ardent advocate for his students' and their work.

"If you sent him something to read, he read it and offered comments," said Jackson-Glidden, who works as a co-op for the Globe's Living Arts section.

"He would tweet out everything we wrote for his class," she said. "If we wrote something he thought was good, he supported us" and would help shop their stories around to news outlets.

"I feel like I'm closer to becoming the writer I want to be because of him, and I'm closer to becoming the person I want to be because of him, and that's way gushier than he'd want me to put it, but it's true," she added.

Steve Annear of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

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