

Vance A. Christian

December 19, 1928 — November 5, 1984

On November 5, 1984, the School of Hotel Administration lost one of its most famous, respected, and dedicated teachers and alumni, Vance Christian.

“Teaching is my greatest joy,” Vance often remarked. “I like to see and be instrumental in developing success. What brings tears to my eyes is recalling some young man or woman sitting across my desk from me who has no idea of his or her potential, convincing the student that he or she has it, and then seeing that person years later as a leader in the hospitality industry.” By the time of his death, Vance had become, in the words of several colleagues, “the closest thing we had to a legend” at the Hotel School.

Born in New York City, Vance moved as a child to rural West Virginia, where his father was a country doctor choosing to serve those who were not fortunate enough to receive adequate medical attention. Vance’s father was his mentor—kind, gentle, patient, but with an underlying independence and iron resolve. Vance adopted his virtues and combined them with his strong opinions and theatrical manner of making his point.

Vance arrived in Ithaca in 1959 through a bit of good luck for him and for Cornell. After earning a chemistry degree at West Virginia State College, he had enlisted in the army and managed an army service club. Upon his discharge he had planned to enroll in the Harvard Business School, when a waiter working for him suggested Cornell. “I don’t want to go to hotel school and be a cook,” Vance recalled telling the waiter. When he reviewed the catalog and became aware of the school’s commitment to management, he changed his mind. He earned a second bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree at Cornell. He then joined the faculty as a lecturer in 1961 and was appointed an assistant professor in 1965, at that time one of only a few black faculty members at Cornell.

Over the years, Vance developed an international reputation as a concerned, caring, and demanding professional, who lived by the philosophy absorbed from his father—concern for people, hard work, independence, and leadership. On campus he developed and taught numerous food and beverage management courses, spicing each lecture and demonstration with strong opinions and a personalized phrase such as “in doing so” or “on the reverse side” followed by an all-knowing smile and a chuckle. His most popular course, “Introduction to Wine and Spirits,” attracted hundreds of Cornell students each semester. For his efforts and leadership in promoting beverage management in the curriculum, he was named the Villa Banfi Professor of Wine Education in 1978.

Students and former students making their way up the echelons of the industry sought out Vance for his sage advice. He became the mentor to a wide range of students, both domestic and international, and to many young faculty members. He took time to listen, to be concerned, and to become involved. The loan fund, which he established in his father's name, quietly assisted deserving students.

Within the industry Vance was well known and highly respected. By example he promoted hospitality-management education as a legitimate and demanding discipline. A black in an industry whose management ranks were almost entirely white, he said his color was not a problem. "I do not teach black management. I teach management. If people want to improve their business or make their personnel more efficient, they don't care who does it."

Vance carried the highest standards of hospitality education with him wherever he traveled throughout the world—Europe, the Far East, Africa, South America, and India. He personified Cornell to those he taught and encountered in distant places and to those government and industry leaders he advised. An established and reputable consultant and management adviser, he also contributed significantly to industry education and research as president of the Society of Wine Educators, as a member of the board of directors of the Culinary Institute of America, and as an active member of the Society for the Advancement of Food Research; the Council on Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education; the Institute of Food Technologists; and the Hotel Sales Management Association.

A bachelor most of his life, Vance's family was the students he taught and the faculty he befriended. Late in his life he married Nena, his steadfast companion through his long and slow illness. Vance never gave up. With deep, moving courage and hope, he talked and planned of coming back. He rose from his bed to lecture to his class and to travel for one last visit to Singapore to give his farewell seminar to the industry he loved.

Vance's passing leaves a void that cannot be filled. He touched our lives in deep and moving ways. A personal giant: tough, but soft underneath; demanding, but understanding; opinionated, but willing to reconsider his position. From humble beginnings to a humble end, Vance was laid to rest in a small country churchyard in rural Virginia beside his mentor, his dad.

Stephen Mutkoski, Normand Peckenpaugh, James Eyster