

## King's College sings farewell to Dr. Angus Johnston

*By Nadine LaRoche*

Alumni Hall is packed.

Students have poured into the hall's two radial staircases, arms hooked around neighbours' knees, notebooks closed and some squirreled away. Last-minute arrivals are leaning against pillars, eyes peering around corners and bodies tucked politely, not to block someone's view. Faculty and staff populate the extra chairs in the back, and alumni are scattered amongst the tight crowd. And Bob Dylan's music is filling up any gap left in the room.

Near the podium, current students and faculty are clad in white T-shirts printed with the singer's signature Ray-Bans, guitars slung around a few necks and mouths open in song.

"All day long I hear him shout so loud," they sing, "crying out that he was framed."

The crowd kicks in.

"I see my light coming shining, from the west unto the east," the room belts. "Any day now, any day now, I shall be released."

Dr. Angus Johnston, seated off to the side, is smiling through his thick silver beard and clapping his hands to the beat. This is his final lecture at King's College as a full-time professor, with his retirement arriving on July 1, 2009, and Johnston has just wrapped up the Foundation Year Programme's first lecture on Dylan. Even with his last song, the long-time professor is still making waves.

Johnston arrived on campus in 1977 as a junior fellow with FYP, and later became the programme's director between 1984 and 1988. He then took on the role of Vice President of the College until 2001, and reassumed the FYP Director position in 2005, a post he held until 2008. For some, Johnston has been a necessary organ at King's for what feels like forever, and one whose contribution to the program extends beyond his kind and thoughtful disposition into his unique way of teaching.

Dr. Neil Robertson, an associate professor in Humanities and Social Sciences at King's, credits Johnston with a teaching method that favours asking questions and opening students to further thinking over supplying clear explanations and absolute answers. And unlike teachers who may think of their pupils as empty vessels in which wisdom and knowledge can be poured, Robertson says Johnston has a different view.

"Everyone in the room is equally full," says Robertson of his colleague's approach. "It's about coming to clarity, explication or articulation of what is already there."

"Truth and wisdom are always there. The question is to get access to that."

This way of teaching is what FYP faculty member Dr. Thomas Curran says has allowed Johnston to connect so well with his students in Halifax Humanities 101, an eight-month course for those living below the poverty line that focuses on the “Great Books” of Western culture, and the follow-up Clemente Seminar. Johnston has been involved in both the program and seminar from the ground up.

“The evident devotion and respect these students have for Angus is staggering,” says Curran of the Clemente participants. “He is able to bring all this material to them in a way so that they feel able and sophisticated partners and colleagues in the education process.”

Robertson tosses Johnston’s ’60s hippy mentality into the mix, adding that the decade’s reaction to the 1950s culture of “usefulness” meant the opposite—uselessness—is centric to the professor. When Halifax’s Clemente program was first taking shape, explains Robertson, a need to be useful to those who have been marginalized kept coming to the forefront.

Johnston, however, persistently advocated uselessness.

“They’re continuously being bombarded with things that are useful for them,” says Robertson of the program’s potential participants. “But what they don’t have are moments of freedom that are ‘useless’ in that they are a purpose upon themselves.”

In addition to his instrumental roles in Halifax Humanities 101, the Clemente Seminar and the Foundation Year Programme, Johnston’s impact on King’s bleeds into the very fabric of the College, both in his fine work as an administrator during his 13-year reign as Vice President, as well as with his extensive involvement in the design and construction of the New Academic Building.

When a swelling student body in the late 1990s prompted the need for a new facility, Johnston was appointed chair of the building committee—and so began the creation of what many, including Johnston, call his “baby.”

He worked with architect Roy Willwerth of Duffus Romans Kundzins Rounsfell Ltd. to design a building that echoed the other facilities on campus while integrating a more modern aesthetic. Johnston immersed himself in the building’s every detail, from doorknobs to light fixtures, and from renaissance-painting-inspired colour schemes to stunning and meaningful architectural features—the ceiling of Alumni Hall combines a circle with an ellipse, symbolizing the dynamic relationship between the ancient and modern views of the cosmos.

Contemporary Studies Programme Director Elizabeth Edwards, who credits Johnston’s administrative contributions for creating a large and vibrant professoriate at King’s while upholding a rigorous concern for matters of equity and justice, says the Dartmouth-born professor’s legacy, from his decisions on architecture in the NAB to his “mind-blowing” lectures, will be with us for a long time.

“His dedication to first-year teaching is an extraordinary model for everyone else in the college,” says Edwards. “I hope his spirit will live on in this institution.”

Before the hall of voices broke out in a glossy-eyed rendition of “I shall be released” on Bob Dylan Day, and before Johnston left his place at the podium, the professor shared his own words of appreciation for the College.

“My dreams are made of iron and steel, with a big bouquet of roses hanging down from the heavens to the ground,” he began, quoting Dylan’s “Never Say Goodbye.”

“That’s been so real for me. Thirty-two years in the Foundation Year Programme has been a little bit like a day in paradise.”