

In Memoriam – Kevin Michael Cleary 1962-2014

JALT President 2010-2014: Teacher, author, leader, friend

On Friday, 10 January 2014, the JALT Board of Directors gathered in Kyoto for our first meeting of the year. Though the last to arrive, our president Kevin was the most excited about beginning the weekend of work. This was what he loved to do: bring people together to build a smart and supportive teaching organization. We swapped jokes and told stories and Kevin was the heart of the group, as always. As he was talking, he collapsed without warning. Kevin was taken to the hospital immediately, but did not regain consciousness. He passed away in the early hours of Thursday, 16 January, surrounded by his family. Kevin is survived by his wife Naoko Fujiwara, son Atticus, daughter Kirsten, mother Ann Cleary, and sisters Karen, Celeste, and Heather.



Kevin touched the lives of so many of us and will be missed more than he could ever know. Hundreds of friends and colleagues gathered at St. Ignatius church in Tokyo for a wake 21 January and funeral the following day. The ceremonies were an emotional celebration of Kevin's optimistic, humble, and caring nature.

Naoko shared some of the last words she had heard from Kevin, "2014 is going to be a good year!" Kevin bore many responsibilities, but he loved his work and always looked for projects that he could improve. Kevin always hoped for the best and believed everyone could grow, learn, and help each other. This tragic loss seems to make that good year impossible, but Naoko promised that she and their children will try to make his dream come true, because Kevin would have wanted them to. Though we are bereft at losing him, we should try to do so too. Kevin was deeply committed to JALT and inspired us all with his gentle leadership.

We also heard the story of Kevin and Naoko's wedding rings. His Irish heritage was a core part of Kevin's identity. He made it part of their marriage by choosing claddagh wedding bands. The claddagh is made up of three parts: a joined pair of hands, clasping a heart, and topped by a crown. The hands symbolize friendship. The heart is love. And the crown represents loyalty. He wore this ring everyday, but more importantly Kevin lived these values. These three principles guided his actions and are part of what made him dear to so many.



Kevin's sister Celeste shared a story that epitomized this character. In high school, he really wanted a car and worked long hours frying fish in a fast food restaurant to save money

for one. He came home speckled with burns from the hot oil. Even worse, the job also came with a uniform—imagine Kevin dressed as a pirate with a red kerchief and giant fake gold hoop earring. And of course, it smelled terrible after a night at work.

But Kevin persevered and saved enough money to buy the huge, old, red Ford of his dreams. He added great speakers and drove around listening to his favorite music. But a couple of years later on a visit back home from school in Chicago, friends noticed that Kevin's amazing car was gone. He explained that his grandmother's cleaning lady didn't have a car, so he gave her his. She needed it, and he could help her. It was that simple for him. That was the kind of person Kevin was.



All of us in JALT have experienced Kevin's generosity. He made time for anyone who needed to talk with him. But it was more than just kindness—he paid attention. He noticed people and understood their needs. He listened.

And we should listen to him. In a letter from Japan in 1990 to his friend Eric Gray back in Oklahoma, Kevin wrote, "To teach, to be independent, to actually help people through school is my mission." Though we will miss him very much, we should be grateful that Kevin actually accomplished his mission in life. His mother and sisters will tell you that he was a born teacher. We in JALT were lucky to have had Kevin in our lives. We are all a little bit better for having known him and learned from him.

With fond memories of Kevin and deepest sympathy for his family,

*The Directors, the Executive Board,
and the membership of NPO JALT*

