



## Howard Estell Cummins

September 22, 1926 - September 5, 2024

Howard Estell Cummins, September 22, 1926 – September 5, 2024

Howard E. Cummins of Norton VA died peacefully in his sleep of natural causes on September 5, just a few weeks shy of his 98th birthday. He will be remembered fondly by a legion of friends, fans and family as a kind mentor, charming colleague, devoted teacher, accomplished author, champion of Appalachian culture and, most importantly, a dedicated family man – his and yours.

The last living member of his immediate family, Howard was pre-deceased by his parents, Pearl Davis and Lawrence W. Cummins, beloved sister Blanch Cummins, and brothers Ralph Cummins, Jack Cummins and Brownie Cummins. Howard was a bachelor with a lifelong devotion to his surviving sisters-in-law, Carolyn Cummins and Anita Cummins, his nieces and nephews – Catherine Cummins, Carol Morley, Cheryl Cummins, Charles Cummins (deceased), Chris Cummins, Claudia Knapp, Cecilia Lasyone, Cynthia Cummins, Ralph Stuart Cummins, Janet Shaw, and Karen Cox and their many children. Howard will be particularly missed by his friend and caregiver, Melissa Hill, and the many students and family he nurtured intellectually and financially throughout his life.

Born in Dunbar VA in 1926, Howard lived a remarkable life of service.

Following the death of his father in 1938, he moved with his family to “Tiny Timbers” in the “Cracker’s Neck” area of Big Stone Gap VA. He graduated from East Stone Gap High School, served honorably in the US Navy at the

end of WWII, and attended Lincoln Memorial University, graduating with a BA in Science and English.

A true “renaissance man” who moved comfortably and knowledgeably from science to literature, Howard began his distinguished teaching career at East Stone Gap before a three-year sabbatical to work for the Foote Mineral Company, an experience that was a source of many insights into the conflict between the business of the mines and the lives of the miners and their families. He resumed his teaching career at Appalachia High School, teaching Biology and English for six years, before moving to Virginia High School in Bristol VA. In the late 60s, Howard moved to Woodbridge High School in Woodbridge VA to teach Advanced Science and Humanities while earning his Masters in Education from the University of Virginia in 1972. While in Woodbridge, he received Teacher of the Year accolades three times before being nominated in 1977 to represent the Commonwealth of Virginia for National Teacher of Year.

After the death of his mother, Howard returned to live with his sister Blanch in Big Stone Gap before settling in Appalachia VA and resuming his teaching career at Mountain Empire Community College. Always a colorful raconteur, Howard’s love of the written word – a passion he sparked in his nieces and nephews – led to the beginning of a long stint as a featured writer focused on Appalachian people, culture, and communities for The Coalfield Progress’ Big Stone Gap Post and, eventually, The Dickenson Star. Never the retiring type he continued to celebrate the culture of the mountains and people he loved in his weekly columns until 2023. A collection of his stories entitled Views from the Mountain to the People in the Valleys was published in 2020.

As his teaching career wound down, Howard increasingly focused on community service. He was a donor and cultural director for the June Tolliver House, named for the heroine of Fox’s most famous novel, The Trail of the Lonesome Pine. In Appalachia, he helped establish the Appalachian Cultural Arts Council, served as its first President, and directed five 3-act plays. With his friend, historian Garnett Gilliam (deceased), Howard helped establish the

Lonesome Pine School and Heritage Center in Big Stone Gap. He was also a member of the Dickenson County Historical Society and the Clintwood Kiwanis Club.

A tireless and talented storyteller, Howard was a “Pied Piper” uncle, who captivated his nieces and nephews (and any of their friends lucky enough to tag along) as they did chores with him or followed him on long hikes through the nearby mountains. He had a wicked sense of humor and the timing of a skilled comedian, yet he was essentially a romantic optimist who viewed the world through an always-tasteful pair of rose-colored sunglasses. He had an endless supply of stories yet, was and is himself the subject of many a tall tale.

His full embrace of, and gratitude for, his life was inspiring, and he shared this gift with everyone he met. Howard was always handy with an encouraging stanza from a poem, like this excerpt from one of his favorites:

To-day, I thought, "I will not plan nor strive;  
Idle as yon blue sky, or clouds that go  
Like loitering ships, with sails as white as snow,  
I simply will be glad to be alive”...

But...The morning passed to mellow afternoon,  
And that to twilight; it was sleep-time soon,—  
And lo! again I had forgot to live.

Unlike the poet Edward Rowland Sill, Howard never forgot to live. We, the fortunate yet now-grieving ones who were touched by his luminous being, will hold him forever in our hearts and minds.

Howard will be interred at Riverview Cemetery in East Stone Gap VA. In lieu of flowers, please make donations in his memory to the Lonesome Pine School and Heritage Center in Big Stone Gap ([lpshc.org](http://lpshc.org)) , the East Stone Gap Riverview Cemetery Fund (POB 24, ESG), Appalachian Cultural Arts

(POB 754), the Dickenson County Historical Society (POB 52, Clintwood) or your favorite charity. A memorial service to celebrate his life will be announced in the future.

# Tribute Wall

MC

“ December 15, 2024  
Howard Estell Cummins  
September 22, 1926 - September 5, 2024

*The best teacher I ever had. Did this doodle of him when he was my 11th grade English teacher. On my first long solo road trip on my way to check out a college I ran into Mr. Cummins at a rest stop. We had lunch together and he led me down the highway all the way to Appalachia where we stopped and parted ways and I never saw him again. Sent him Christmas cards over the years and used many of his words of wisdom he instilled in me that went way beyond High School English. You sir were a gift to the good in this world and will be missed!*

*A tree will be planted in our family grove in Scotland in his honor.  
Thank you Mr. Cummins! <https://treesforlife.org.uk/groves/g5314/>*

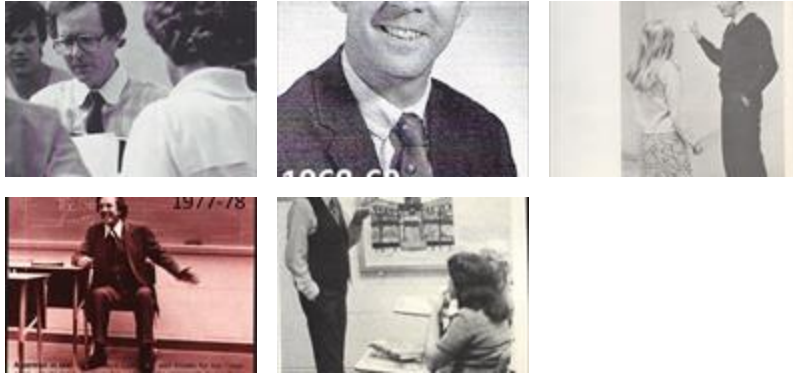


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**mike copperthite** - December 14, 2024 at 10:41 AM

AR

“ 9 files added to the album Photos of Howard



Alan Ross - December 13, 2024 at 05:44 PM

JL

“ Mr Cummins was my English teacher at Woodbridge Sr High School in 1974 & 1975...and was a blessing to all who knew him. He was one of those teachers that made an impact on his students and left his unique signature on your life... weather it was through his dramatic readings of the classics like My Fair Lady or Man of La Mancha...or telling you where you should go to College as he handed you his personal letter of reference. I found literature fascinating because of Mr Cummins... and I attended James Madison University because Mr Cummins told me it was perfect for me....and he was right. I have thought of him often in my life and how he steered me to tge right choices and very much appreciate having known the beautiful man he was. He will be missed very much... but he was loved by many, many people. Although he never married... he had many children...and I consider myself one of the fortunate kids who stepped inside his class as a child and left as an adult with a sparkle in my eye... Jeffrey Lutman, Class of 76 WSHS

Jeffrey Lutman - December 13, 2024 at 09:23 AM

ES

“ When I was in the army at Fort Belvoir, Va, Howard, an employee of the local penitentiary, and another member of my battalion lived together in the same house in Occoquan. The house was owned by Maime Lou Davis, one of the town's most notable citizens. We had a blast (as we used to say in those days). Howard, along with our next door neighbor, Floyd Freeze, who was also a teacher at Woodbridge, kept us in stitches. For my Army friend and I, it was like having 3(naughty) big brothers.

After I got out of the army and graduated college, I came back to visit, and it was like nothing had changed. I'll never forget Howard, and my time in Occoquan.

*Ernie Soderlund*

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**Ernie Soderlund** - October 20, 2024 at 10:47 PM

CM

“ Mr Cummins was my English teacher at Woodbridge senior High School. We all were super fond of Mr Cummins and appreciated his nice clothing and were imprsssedby him living in Occoquan. He touched and mentored a lot of students. What an adventurous life he led. He was an impression to many students and his passing is a significant loss. We are blessed that he help in shaping the adults we became. His family can take comfort in knowing that. Thank you for sharing Mr Cummins with us. He will be missed as he was one of a kind.

*Chris McCabe*  
*WSHS Class of 79*

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**Chris McCabe** - September 21, 2024 at 10:53 PM

MK

“ Howard was my science teacher at Virginia High School in the early 70's and sparked a huge interest in science and biology which set the direction for my career. I went on to get my PhD in chemical engineering and have been fortunate to work on important new medicines and vaccines. I often wondered what direction I would have taken if not for Howard Cummings. Thank you Howard! Mike King

Michael L. King - September 14, 2024 at 12:33 PM

MS

“ Mary Etta Sumner lit a candle in memory of Howard Estell Cummins



Mary Etta Sumner - September 13, 2024 at 10:32 AM

MS

*Sending prayers and comfort to the Cummins family.*

Mary Etta Sumner - September 13, 2024 at 10:34 AM

SE

“ was my English teacher in 1959 I was a senior always enjoyed his class all of us girls had crush on him

shirley evans - September 11, 2024 at 02:16 PM

EB

“ Beautiful tribute to Mr. Cummins. I had the pleasure of knowing him as a teacher at Appalachia High School. He was an awesome teacher & treated all of his students with respect. He has left quite a legacy for all who knew him to treasure. 🌈—Ernestine Wolfe Bowers

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**Ernestine Bowers** - September 11, 2024 at 01:59 PM

DC

“ I consider myself so fortunate to have known Uncle Howard. It's been a delight to see him over the years. And I'll never forget how he got my grandmother, in her 80's, out on the dance floor at our wedding in Sonoma Valley, CA. He was so dashing, and I know she was just delighted. (see the photo in the photo gallery.) -- Druanne (Ralph Stuart's wife.)

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**Druanne Cummins** - September 11, 2024 at 01:39 PM

DC

“ 1 file added to the album Photos of Howard



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**Druanne Cummins** - September 11, 2024 at 01:34 PM