

Ray Doherty – actor who taught drama

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CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

John Raymond “Ray” Doherty, a former drama teacher and self-titled “really nice guy” whose 37-year career inspired hundreds of Bay Area students to pursue the arts, died after a short battle with cancer.

Mr. Doherty, a San Carlos resident who taught at Sequoia High School in Redwood City, was 71.

Appearing in more than 100 community-theater productions, Mr. Doherty believed in leading by example. He couldn’t teach acting

without doing, said his wife, Joanne Engelhardt.

Bearing a striking resemblance to Benjamin Franklin, he played what would be his favorite role in two local productions of the musical “1776” and dressed up as the founding father for Independence Day parades and talks to the Daughters of American Revolution. He joked that “he could really take this on the road,” Engelhardt said.

Kenny Ortega, a friend and student from the class of 1968, said Mr. Doherty took a scholarly approach to teaching theater to thou-

sands of students over his career. Ortega would later choreograph for movies like “Newsies” and “Dirty Dancing,” and would go on to win three Emmy Awards, one for choreographing the hit made-for-TV movie “High School Musical,” which he also directed.

But, he said, as Mr. Doherty’s student, “I never felt as if I had truly won him over or ever really impressed him.” Years later, Mr. Doherty ventured that he would have turned out weaker actors had he not been strict and held high expectations for his students, Ortega said.



Ray Doherty taught drama at Sequoia High School for 37 years. He also acted in local productions.

Friends described Mr. Doherty, a San Francisco native who earned a doctorate in education from San Jose State University, as a thoroughly colorful man.

Mike Ryan, a fellow Sequoia High teacher, said Mr. Doherty had a knack for comic timing. As host at a party for Ryan, Mr. Doherty dressed in a full tuxedo, pointing out that the colors he was wearing

represented three high schools where Ryan had taught. When someone yelled, “What about Woodside?” Mr. Doherty slowly unbuttoned his pants to show off his drawers. They were the signature bright orange of Sequoia’s chief rival, Ryan said with a laugh.

Actors who truly love the craft are said to be married to the stage. Mr. Doherty took that literally. In 1989, he married Engelhardt on the set of a community production of “Brighton Beach Memoirs.” Guests were invited to see the couple star in “Happily Ever After” on invitations resembling movie tickets.

Beyond the theater, Mr. Doherty harbored a deep love for baseball, attending Fantasy Camps for

San Francisco Giants fans five years in a row. He won “Mr. Nice Guy” awards at more than one of the camps, further fueling this self-proclamation, which he has placed as a title under his name on business cards, Engelhardt said.

In addition to his wife, Mr. Doherty is survived by four children from a previous marriage: Bill Doherty of Santa Clara, Elizabeth Doherty of Pacifica, John Doherty of Redwood City, and Patricia Hevel of Redwood City. He also is survived by six grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held May 28 at 1 p.m. at Sequoia High School’s Carrington Hall, where Mr. Doherty directed every student production of his teaching career.