

Richard S. Aaronian '76, '78, '97 (Hon.); P'94, P'97

Throughout your 49-year career at Exeter, your boundless appetite for life and the natural world, your innate decency, and your devoted care for your students made you one of the school's most beloved instructors, coaches and dorm parents. "When you talk about biology, you're talking about the study of living," says one former student. "That's what Rich brought into that classroom."

Growing up in Massachusetts as the child of Armenian immigrants, you decided in 10th-grade biology class that you wanted to become a teacher. The first member of your family to attend college, you studied zoology at the University of New Hampshire. Though Air Force Reserve training during the Vietnam War interrupted your graduate studies, you were back at UNH pursuing your master's when you saw a notice advertising a job at the Academy.

The biology field was exploding when you became a full-time faculty member in 1971. You proposed the addition of courses in marine biology and ornithology, inspired by your love of intertidal ecology and birding. Soon, students were cruising to the New Hampshire seacoast to collect marine organisms and trekking through sand dunes on Plum Island in search of snowy owls or migratory birds. "He took learning and turned it into an adventure," says another former student.

Such excursions were rare at the time, and your colleagues credit you with building the place-based field trip program that is now an integral part of Exeter's science curriculum. In the spirit of learning as adventure, you co-led trips to Costa Rica, the Galápagos Islands and the Amazon for both students and alumni. "His enthusiasm was so infectious that I know I'll be a birder for life," says one of the many Exonians lucky enough to take your ornithology class or go on one of your famous bird walks during reunion visits.

Your passion for nature — even the grisly parts — was on full display when you joined other science instructors and a few students in spending hours removing the flesh from the body of a humpback whale that had washed up on the beach in Cape Cod. Its skeleton now hangs in the atrium of the Phelps Science Center. Shortly after that, your son Eric returned to his alma mater to teach in the Science Department. You remember his years here as some of the most enjoyable of your career, even though he dubbed you "the old Aaronian."

As dorm head, you welcomed the first girls into Amen Hall at the outset of coeducation and made it a haven for them at a challenging time. In Amen, and later in Bancroft and Williams House, you and your equally beloved wife, Peg, created the sense of community so vital to a residential school, providing a nurturing and down-to-earth presence for hundreds of young people far from home.

For 26 years, you coached boys JV hockey, teaching your players the no-frills style they dubbed "old-time hockey" — hardworking and disciplined, but always with a sense of

fun. "Rich managed to make a JV team feel like it was the only team," says one former player. You transferred those values from the rink to the diamond, serving as assistant coach to the JV baseball team for a decade.

Chair of the Science Department from 1991 to 1995, you were named the Harlan Page Amen Professor of Science in 1999 and received numerous other honors, including the Rupert Radford Faculty Fellowship Award, the Brown Family Faculty Award and the George S. Heyer Jr. '48 Teaching Award. Though you might not have spoken often in faculty meetings, colleagues listened when you did. A former colleague recalls: "He reminded us that Exeter is a high school, not a college, and our students are teenagers who would make mistakes." You brought warmth and compassion to the many committees on which you served, offered support and mentorship to your colleagues, and always emphasized the faculty's most important role: to take care of students.

The entire Exeter community mourned with you when you lost your son Sam, even as you found a way to keep being there for your students. You've experienced more than your share of sorrow, one colleague says, but you have "figured out a way to go through life constantly learning and extracting as much delight" from the world as you can. An honorary member of three classes, you formed lasting bonds with multiple generations of Exonians, and you nurture these connections by attending alumni events on campus and around the country. In honor of your retirement, the class of 1978 established a funded summer internship for an Exeter student at the Shoals Marine Lab on Appledore Island in Maine; the program launched in 2022.

Rich, in the classroom and in the dorm, as a colleague, teacher, coach and friend, you exemplify the Academy's core value of uniting knowledge and goodness. Your energy, your curiosity and your resilience inspire us all, and it is our great pleasure to present you with the 2023 Founders' Day Award.