

# In memoriam:

## Robert Ash, 1935-2015

Robert B. Ash died in Urbana, April 15, 2015. Bob was born in New York, NY, in 1935. He received his BA (1955) and then a BS (1956), MS (1957) and PhD (1960) in Electrical Engineering from Columbia University. He was an Assistant Professor in Electrical Engineering at Columbia University and then a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, before coming to the University of Illinois Department of Mathematics in 1963. He retired in 1990.

Bob wrote thirteen textbooks but he was most proud of the eight books he posted on his web page during his retirement that were available for free downloading. He got many emails of thanks for those books. Like this one from a professor in Ankara:

“I want to give my deepest gratitude to your service to the mathematics society by your book and lecture notes. Your generosity is truly appreciated. Live a long and healthy life with peace knowing that you did a lot of good things.”

His career followed an unusual path, said Harold Diamond, a professor emeritus who knew Bob in the years after he came to the U of I in 1967. Instead of focusing on authoring research papers, Bob spent time teaching and writing textbooks on a “staggeringly wide” array of topics ranging from statistics to algebraic number theory, Diamond said.

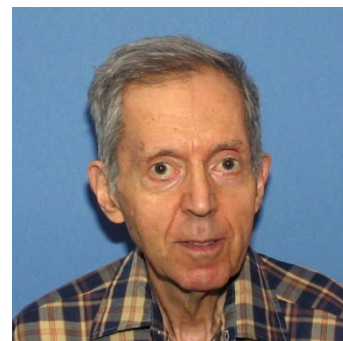
“He would take up the study of something and write a textbook on it,” Diamond said. “His books weren’t at the forefront of research, but they were at the level that college students and graduate students might learn from.”

Robert J. McEliece, a former member of the Illinois Department of Mathematics called Bob “one of the best scientific minds on campus.”

One of his former students said, “I took several of Professor Ash’s graduate level math classes. Professor Ash would not just “grade” the homework, but would explain in detail what was missing or where I took a wrong step. Always helpful, always striving to have us learn the material. A great teacher and a good man.”

In addition to teaching and writing math Bob loved learning (he had just started studying elementary physics) and he loved jogging. After his first sabbatical his required report to the department chairman that listed sabbatical accomplishments included a 5:08 mile. Bob was also a chess player. He played as a boy and started again in 1973, averaging a dozen tournaments a year through 1995. He played throughout the midwest and also in Philadelphia, New York, Toronto, Berkeley, Vancouver etc. Bob relished his wins over higher-ranked players. The best player he beat was a Senior Master with a rating of 2436 and after that Bob used 2436 as his password as often as he could.

A few years ago he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s. He was still doing relatively well, enjoying daily walks and working with a trainer at a gym. Near the end of one of his regular walks in Urbana, he was hit in a crosswalk by a car and died 6 hours later of his injuries. His wife of 59 years, Carol, and brother, Charlie, of Manchester, NH, will miss him very much.



Robert B. Ash