

Francis James “Jock” Turcot, a visionary president

By Michel Prévost

When Jock Turcot became president of the University of Ottawa Students’ Union in 1965, no one suspected he would go down in the institution’s history. Although he has been gone for nearly 45 years, his memory lives on: Jock Turcot University Centre, one of the main buildings on campus, was named after him.

James “Jock” Turcot was born in 1943 in Kenora, Ontario, but his family moved frequently in Ontario and Québec, as his father was the head of a major logging company. In the early 1960s, Jock left his family in Saint-Charles-de-Mandeville, Québec, to study civil law at the University of Ottawa. Fluently bilingual, he was described as a distinguished, serious and hardworking young man.

He quickly became interested in student politics and was elected chief of publications for the Students’ Union, then presided over by Robert Campbell. At the beginning of 1965, Campbell stepped down and Turcot replaced him. General elections followed shortly thereafter, and Turcot was elected president of the Union.

A visionary president

Turcot quickly stood out because of his charisma and vision. He had a dream: to create a centre for students that would bring all of the campus’ essential daily services together under one roof. Turcot also wanted to create a gathering place for the school’s students, professors and staff members. He wanted the setting to be more laidback than classrooms and administration offices.

Sadly, Turcot would not see his dream come true. He died tragically in a car accident on Christmas Day 1965. After attending midnight mass on Christmas Eve on campus and celebrating the festivities with international students, he headed home to spend the Holidays with his family, but he never made it. He was only 22 years old. After returning from the Holidays, the University community was shocked by the news, and on January 11, 1966, the administration organized a Eucharistic celebration in his memory.

Jock Turcot University Centre

Fortunately, the vision for a social centre that Turcot held so dear did not die with his passing. The Jock Turcot Memorial Fund was created to offset part of the construction costs of a university centre. Turcot’s dream finally became reality in 1974 with the inauguration of the Jock Turcot University Centre. Although the man who first championed the project would not see its inauguration, another Turcot was in attendance—Jock’s brother Mark, who was then himself president of the Student Federation (formerly the Students’ Union).

In 1991, for the 25th anniversary of Jock Turcot’s death, a commemorative plaque was unveiled in the Centre that so proudly bears his name. A photo of Turcot is also still on display at the entrance to the Student Federation’s office. In short, the young, charismatic president who was taken in the prime of his life is still very much alive in spirit and

memory at Canada's University.

Michel Prévost is chief archivist at the University of Ottawa.