A little over a week ago, Rice lost a scholar, educator, leader, and beloved friend to many of us. Marjorie Corcoran served at Rice for 37 years, and in that time, she touched nearly every aspect of the University.

She was one of the first people I met when I visited Rice as a candidate for a faculty job, and I will never forget the enthusiasm she showed for her students, for her work, and for her colleagues...and how welcome she made me feel. If Rice was filled with people like Marj, then this was a place where I wanted to be.

As I got to know her better, she became a role model of the ideal University Professor. ...an example of how to fulfill and embrace all aspects of our vocation.

To Marj’s scholarly community, she was a gifted high-energy particle physicist. She worked at large national facilities that smash electrons and ions together at incredibly high energies seeking to uncover the secrets of what those fundamental particles are made of and what binds them together. She was driven by an appreciation of nature’s beauty and a fundamental curiosity to understand its inner workings .... A reminder to all of us of the important role that universities play in the discovery of knowledge.

She was very good at what she did, earning many accolades during her career, such as becoming a Fellow of her professional society and holding leadership positions within her community.

She was a trailblazer as a woman in a field that was dominated by men, and in January of 2015, she was recognized for her lifelong contributions as the Woman Physicist of the Month by the Committee on the Status of Women in Physics of the American Physical Society.

But I think Marj was most proud of her work mentoring young students of physics. Her teaching efforts were primarily dedicated to the largest introductory physics classes, reaching several hundred students each year. At her memorial service, students left moving, written testimonials of what Marj meant to them...describing her patience when they were confused, and her support when they were troubled – It didn’t matter whether it was a physics problem or a personal one, Marj was there for them and students knew it.

As a mentor, her enthusiasm for her field was contagious, and she guided many students into careers in physics... She involved a small army of undergraduates in her research group building detector hardware. Each year, one or two students were lucky enough to accompany her for a life-changing summer research experience at Fermilab, a large Department of Energy Facility near Chicago.

Marj was particularly passionate about supporting young women in physics. Her position as a role model was obvious, but she did much more. For example, over the last year, she worked with a talented group of physics majors and a colleague in our department to bring 150 women to Rice for the Southwest Regional Conference for Undergraduate Women in Physics.
It is fair to say that Marj was tireless in her commitment to giving back to the communities in which she lived. She coordinated, in cooperation with the University of Houston, Houston’s chapter of Quarknet, the national outreach program for particle physics. Through this, she interacted with thousands of secondary school students and dozens of teachers, introducing them to the excitement of fundamental physics research.

Of her many contributions to the campus community, I want to highlight her role as the first speaker of the Faculty Senate from 2005-2007.

I served as a Senator during that time, and was inspired by her leadership. In the traditions and the culture of what has gone on to be an effective body for shared faculty governance, we see her legacy. Working with President Leebron, she established the productive working relationship between administration and faculty. She reached out to students to ensure their input was taken into account.

She led with civility and grace... showing respect for all viewpoints... but she never hesitated to speak clearly and forcefully when needed. Under Marj, the Senate established itself as capable of resolute and thoughtful action, with clear purview over policies affecting curricula and faculty. We shouldn’t take for granted that this would be the case.

Most of all, and personally, I will remember the energy she brought to everything she did, her infectious smile, and how quick she was to laugh – which could disarm and defuse the most stressful situation.

Like those student she brought with her to Fermilab for a summer of particle physics, we were all very lucky to work with Marj and to be inspired by her. She will be greatly missed, but never forgotten at Rice.