Comments on the passing of Dr. Richard N. Passero by his students, friends and colleagues
(compiled by William B. Harrison – April 7, 2020)

From the Facebook page: Friends & Alumni of WMU Department of Geological and Environmental Sciences

Dear Friends and Alumni,

We are saddened to let you know that WMU Emeritus Professor of Geology Dick Passero has passed away from COVID-19 on Friday, April 3 at Yale University. Our deepest condolences go out to his family, friends, and all of us who have known and worked with him.

Facebook page comments:

Brian Miller: Very sad news. He gave a very insightful and emotionally impactful speech at the 50 year celebration of the Geology Department. He loved the Department and was thankful for all who have helped make it what it is today......a bow to him and his contributions.

Carolyn Rutland: I’m so sorry to hear that. I really liked Dick.

Bill Steinmann: One of my trusted and admired professors.

Christine Kosmowski: Oh, how sad. He was one of my favorite professors.

From James Brode, Posted on Facebook, April 6, 2020

The world lost a great man to this virus. Dr. Dick Passero passed away. Dr. Passero was a professor emeritus in the WMU Geosciences dept. He was as likable and approachable as they come. An influential and well respected professor of hydrogeology, he paved the way for so many of us. I will remember him as a beautiful human being, an excellent teacher and a man of immense sincerity. He listened to people and always
answered you with a well thought response. He cared deeply about the truth and did his best to give his students the tools they needed to better themselves. When I saw him last, I was able to thank him for helping me get my first job. What he did for me positioned me for a career I’ve had for over 35 years now. May you rest in peace.

From Nicholas C. Pogoncheff, email sent April 6, 2020

Dear Dr. Sultan and WMU Community: I am saddened upon notification of the passing of our dear Dr. Passero. Over several decades of service at WMU, Dr. Passero enriched the lives of our community and families. Attached is a personal draft transcript of the tribute that I presented (September 2015) as part of the Geosciences 50th Anniversary in recognition of Dr. Passero’s extraordinary achievements and contributions to the evolution and success of the WMU Geological and Environmental Sciences Department. As proposed by Dr. Sauck, I also welcome the entire WMU Community to establish a Department Endowment on behalf of Dr. Passero.

Nick also included a Testimonial he wrote and presented at the Department’s 50th Anniversary Celebration in 2015 as follows:

Tribute to Dr. Richard N. Passero

As presented by Nicholas Pogoncheff (MS Environmental Earth Sciences, 1982)  
September 15, 2015  
Western Michigan University Department of Geosciences 50th Anniversary  
Rood Hall Auditorium, Kalamazoo, Michigan  
In tribute to our Dear Dr. Passero (draft transcript):

Dr. Passero is the quintessential model of a successful, extraordinary, and inspiring professor, mentor and colleague for all of us gathered here this weekend to commemorate the Department of Geosciences 50th Anniversary, and to pay special tribute to Dr. Passero for being instrumental in the success of our many professional careers as groundwater and geoscience professionals. Dr. Passero was my thesis advisor from 1979 through 1982, and during that time and through recommendations upon graduating, influenced the beginning of my professional career as a consulting hydrogeologist in Northern California. Your guidance has been magnificent in so many ways.

I express gratitude for your vision in providing a graduate program to study contaminant hydrogeology and never ending motivation and entrepreneurial spirit – it was non-stop every day - from academic classes to the UIC program - to research, field work, and reporting for groundwater studies throughout Kalamazoo County – often times, all in one day. Do you remember constructing the prototype seepage meter to measure flux between groundwater and the pond at the KL Landfill, or when a pocket of methane gas was encountered while drilling to install groundwater monitoring wells at the Cork Street Landfill and the PVC well casing shot straight up skyward, soaring – we opened our wings and learned to fly. And to you Dr. Sauck, the magic guidance you provided in the field and classroom is forever precious as well. Within our program there was never time for defeat or criticism, rather a path forward to the next project or activity of the day, week, or month.
Dr. Passero, if our Nation’s Congress were aware of the many ways in which you embraced the essence of the Clean Water Act of 1972 and subsequent planning and implementation, you would not only be a hero of ours in this Geology Department, but a National hero as well. Your entrepreneurial spirit is forever and far reaching, and for those of us assembled in this room, including: former graduate students, former and current faculty (including Dr. Straw), and my life-long friends and colleagues Mike Wireman and Kevin Kincare, your vision has been instrumental in achieving both successful and gratifying professional and academic careers. Just look around the room to see the admiration (love) and respect for all you have accomplished and provided for us. Thank you from all of us for enriching our lives, and the lives of our families.

From Mike Wireman, Email sent April 6, 2020

This is such sad news. It is very hard to accept. Dick was my mentor and a great friend. He was incredibly influential in my education and in my career at EPA. I think I was his first grad student with a hydrogeology focus? I remember he and I putting in three groundwater monitoring wells by hand in a cornfield in Schoolcraft Cy. - before the Dept had any field equip. He spent hours with me in the field -we installed the wells with a tripod, a fence post driver and a drive point. I also remember that he hired Nick Pogoncheff and I to paint his house - 2 times! The house really did not need to be painted -but Nick and I needed the money. Nick Pogoncheff, Kevin Kincare and I were very engaged in the EPA UIC grant that Dick and Tome Straw managed. It was a great experience for "young bucks trying to make their way in the word" as Dick would say. I remember the old house that the grant rented from the University where the UIC project was conducted - a very short walk to the Knollwood Tavern. I also recall that Dick was a good friend to Caspar Cronk - a prof in the Department for a couple of years. Caspar was not a typical professor type and had some troubles -but Dick always supported him. I also recall visits Dick made to Boulder when my daughter was very young and we would walk along the Boulder Creek path - he was very interested in the Boulder Creek bike/hike trail through the City and always wanted Kalamazoo to open up the River in a similar way. While I was at EPA I had the good fortune to hire Dick to help us write an ASTM guide on Groundwater Vulnerability Assessment Methods. We always tried to play golf when he visited - he was an avid golf fan. I'm so glad we were able to honor Dick at the Department’s 50 year anniversary ceremony. I fully support the suggestions for an Endowment or Scholarship fund in Dick's name. I will miss him and will always be grateful for his friendship.

From W. Richard Laton, email sent April 6, 2020

Dr. Passero was a gentleman, mentor, friend and educator. I doubt that many of you know that Dick was the reason we had a blimp! In purchasing the blimp for my coastal research, Dick said I needed to go to elementary schools and teach both teachers and students about environmental remote sensing (which I did and enjoyed greatly).

Also, I can thank Dick for teaching me how to use a drilling rig (I almost killed Dick in Cass County while drilling once in the snow - will leave the full story to different time).

I had the pleasure of working with Dick on his last field hydrogeology camp. He never stopped teaching or learning. I was glad that he came to the 50th, so many of us had the opportunity to thank Dr. Passero in person. He will be missed by us all.
From Alan E. Kehew, email sent April 6, 2020

That is devastating news. He put his heart and soul into this department when he was here. In addition to Dick's scientific contributions, he had interests in many other areas. I remember Tom telling me that Dick was the quarterback of his high school football team. In retirement, Dick became a very accomplished painter. He and Ginny spent a weekend with my ex and I in Maine a few years ago and when we took a few day trips to scenic areas along the coast, Dick checked out every gallery that we saw (Maine has a lot of them). More recently, he told me that he had had his first showing at a gallery in Connecticut. What I remember most about Dick was his determination whether it was putting in wells in the field, working with students, or working on a paper. He would never give up on something until it was done right, no matter how long it took.

From Ron and Chris Chase, email sent April 6, 2020

I am saddened to hear of Dick's passing. Dick was a true gentleman who cared about people and was always available to help them in any way possible, whether their problems were academic or personal. His wisdom and enthusiasm were major influences in the direction of the early department's teaching and research. His contributions to the department, and to humanity, were a never-ending look at possibilities and ways of getting things done. His role in the establishment of the hydrogeology program is certainly his most visible contribution. Equally honorable was the mentoring of his many students in the classroom and in one-on-one discussions.

It was a privilege to call Dick my friend. He was always available to be a sounding board professionally and personally. Chris and I were honored when he served as the Best Man at our wedding. We will truly miss him. Our hearts and prayers go out to Ginny, Kathy, and family. A wonderful person has passed away.

From Bill Sauck, email sent April 6, 2020

What terrible news. Dick was a pillar of the department for a long time. As others have noted, he was instrumental if not in the lead of getting all these things started: earth science education, environmental geology, hydrogeology, Institute for Water Sciences, the GEM program, as well as always giving valued counsel in meetings. Kelly and I have passed through Madison, CT regularly on our way to visit my two daughters who live further east, and have always stopped to visit Dick and Ginny, sometimes for a day, but at least for a meal together. Last time, instead of going to a favorite restaurant, they both collaborated and prepared a wonderful gourmet dinner that we will never forget. Our hearts go out to Ginny, their daughter, and grand-daughter (who Dick had taken many times to Disney in Orlando). Dick, a great conversationalist, was always interested in a wide range of topics, including hearing news of our Department. We are sad that he was taken so early by this terrible disease, and offer our deepest condolences to Ginny.
From Duane Hampton, email sent April 6, 2020

This is a true loss.

Dick is responsible, along with Tom Straw and Lloyd Schmaltz, for the establishment of our department's reputation in environmental sciences and hydrogeology, including creating our summer hydrogeology field course. He was a principal figure in attracting an EPA grant in the late 1970's to study the suitability of Michigan's aquifers for deep waste injection wells, which resulted in funding many graduate students and in the department putting together and publishing the Hydrogeologic Atlas of Michigan. Along with Tom, Dick is primarily responsible for our department's extensive curriculum in applied water sciences. He and Tom attracted state funding of $200K/yr for 5 years for our program, which allowed the department to hire Al Kehew and me. He attracted grant funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation that established a Groundwater Education in Michigan (GEM) center at Western that persisted well beyond the initial grant's expiration due to statewide respect for Dick's ability to do quality applied research and outreach. Dick took an existing design for an aquifer teaching tool consisting of two parallel glass panes 1 inch apart filled with sand and clay layers, and developed the modern design for a robust teaching tool used everywhere to demonstrate groundwater flow to fascinated young students. He created a geology student group to build these models cheaply in Rood Hall for resale to K-12 schools, and workshops and videos to train teachers to make their own even more inexpensively. He created the Institute for Water Sciences at Western which hired R.V. Krishnamurthy and Michael Barcelona.

What Dick did was a lasting testament of his commitment to creating a better world for all of us in Michigan and beyond. There is a lot more to his story. It exemplifies the idea that there is no limit to what a person can accomplish as long as they don't insist on getting acclaim for all of it. I miss him, and hope his wife Virginia and daughter are OK.

From Linda Harrison, email sent April 6, 2020

Dick Passero made such a contribution to this department and to all of us.

In Dick's Christmas card last year, he mentioned he had been spending the last five years working to convert an historic old school building into a community center. He said he was still painting and playing golf and wished he were in Florida playing year-round.

Let me quote from his card:

"Hope the year has been good to you and yours, and our sympathies to those whose lives have been touched by sadness. Draw some comfort from this season for remembering the good times."

We will remember the good times with Dick--how he was a wonderful friend and teacher, worked with other faculty members to establish the hydro program in our department, and made a lasting contribution.

He is sorely missed.
Duane et.al.
You did a wonderful summary of the Hydro program that Dick Passero developed while at WMU.

Dick Passero was at WMU when I was a graduate student in the Department. Dr. Passero's initial role was establishing the "first" Michigan Earth Science Teachers program where half the graduate students and many undergraduates in the late 60's were graduating with Earth Science teaching certificates. This was the foundation for the WMU Earth Science Teaching program that produced hundreds of Undergrad and Graduate students to fill the required High School Earth Science programs.

It was later when Dick Passero took his sabbatical and went to California to study hydro-geology and make WMU the premier hydro program that was copied by many other Universities, but their programs were not the caliber of the WMU program as you have summarize so well.

Lastly, for some of us he was a personal friend while we were in school who will be missed and it was great that he attended the 50th anniversary function.

All of our prayers are for his family and for those of us who have memories of being mentored directly or indirectly by Richard Passero.

Thanks Linda for sharing this information. Dr. Passero was a great mentor and professor. I have many wonderful memories with him in the field and in the lab. Not only was he extremely intelligent and thoughtful, he was a gentleman and always concerned about the students and their future. He will be missed, it would be great to find a way for his legacy to live on.

Very sad news. Deepest sympathy and prayers for strength and safety for his family, friends, and all whose lives he has touched. May everyone be comforted by memories of him, what he stood for, and how he influenced where we all are today. He was dedicated to the department, the students, and was a genuinely good-hearted person and role model.

What sad news. Dick was one of the architects of the WMU hydrogeology program. His contributions to the Department and our profession are incalculable.

I was just remembering that there was a very nice video with Dick Passero prepared for the Department's 50th anniversary celebration. Linda flew out to Connecticut to tape an interview with him and Jenny Trout edited it for the celebration. Perhaps we could put that video on our website or Utube to commemorate his contributions to the Department.

Perhaps a scholarship fund for Hydrogeologists could also be established.

Please let us know if the Department plans any contribution or other tribute.
From Michael Kovacich, email sent April 6, 2020

Thank you for passing on the sad news. He was a great teacher and I really enjoyed his lectures and his labs.

From James Ferritto, email sent April 6, 2020

Tragic loss. He influenced a lot of people. It was great to see so many folks offering high praise of him during our Department reunion a few years ago. Prayers to the Passero family. Please stay safe everyone.

From Carla Koretsky, email sent April 6, 2020

I am so sorry to learn this. My heart goes out to his family.

From Peter J. Voice, email sent April 6, 2020

Good Day Everyone,

I will admit that I only shared one conversation with Dick – at the 50th anniversary. What I did learn from that conversation, was that Dick was committed to earth science education at all levels. I sent a note out to the MESTA Historian (and one of the founders of the group), Rod Cranson, after seeing Mohamed’s email this morning. Some of you may be aware that Lloyd Schmaltz and Dick Passero both were active in the foundation of the Michigan Earth Science Teachers Association.

Rod shared this with me:

Hi Peter,
Thanks for relating the very say news regarding Dick Passero’s death. As my may know, he played a critical role in the very early years as MESTA was just getting started. I would like to prepare an article for the MES and a note for the April e-news

From R. V. Krishnamurthy, email sent April 6, 2020

Very sad news. I had only limited interaction with Dick. But I was fully aware of his contribution to the Department. He was one of the few who spent more than an hour when I set up the stable isotope lab asking many questions about the instrument, extraction lines and so on. It is even a greater shock that COVID should take him away from us. RIP

From Robb Gillespie, email sent April 6, 2020

I met Dick at a number of the advisory council meetings, and always had an interesting conversation about the GEOS department with him every time. He cared a lot about our department and about us, and he will sorely be missed.
Sad news indeed.
From Ron Parker, email sent April 6, 2020

Thank you everyone for sharing all of your short wonderful stories about Dr. Passero. Being an early to mid-1970s Geology student, Dr. Passero was instrumental in my choosing the geosciences as a career.

When I was a youngster growing up in Kalamazoo I asked my mom which of us four children was her favorite. She said that all of you kids are my favorite. I did not understand how this could be. In reflecting this morning about Dr. Passero as all of your emails come in, I realize now that he was one of my favorite professors. I now understand what my mom was saying.

From Diana Morton Thompson and Paul Daniels, email sent April 6, 2020

Paul and I are so shocked and saddened by the news on Dr. Passero. Truly a huge loss for so many of us on both a personal and professional level. You all have been so articulate in your comments that we have very little to add except to say how much Dick inspired us. No matter how steep the hill or how bureaucratic the situation, Dick never stopped trying to make kind and positive differences in the lives of communities and individuals. Now it is up to each one of us to be sure that we carry forward his spirit and legacy to help make the world a better place.

From Dr. Lloyd J. Schmaltz, sent April 10, 2020

Remembrance of Dr. Richard N. Passero: I was greatly saddened to learn of Dick's passing. When I first hired Dick I was impressed with his desire to work with students in Earth Science Education. He developed that program into an important part of the Geology Department's focus. Western's Teacher Education program in Earth Science became well-recognized in Michigan.

As already noted by his colleagues and students, Dick was responsible for establishment of the Department's Hydrogeology program, which is currently greatly respected. Dick's contributions became a cornerstone in the Department’s offerings and gave recognition to Geology’s program among Western Michigan University's science departments.

I greatly respected Dick for his hard work and dedication to his students. He will always be remembered and I will miss him.