



## Robert R. Churchill

(19 November 1946 – 14 November 2004)

*Tamar Mayer*

**B**ob Churchill, William R. Kenan Jr., professor of geography at Middlebury College, was a great inspiration to his students, his colleagues in the geography department, the college, and the profession at large. His legacy will continue through the achievements of his more than 2,000 students who are smarter, stronger, and more perceptive as a result of their work with him. Brendan Bechtel ('03) captured the sentiments of almost all of Bob's students in saying, "Our accomplishments, our love for geography, our ability to contribute and make a difference, these are tributes to Bob and a testament to the power and impact of his teaching."

Bob was promptly drafted into the Army after earning his bachelor of science degree in Earth Sciences at Northern Illinois University in 1969, serving as a chaplain's assistant in Berlin, West Germany. Afterward, Bob earned a master of science degree in geography from Northern Illinois University and a Ph.D. in geography from the University of Iowa. Joining Middlebury College's faculty in 1978, Bob became a major force behind the shaping of the geography department which he chaired for most of the 1980s.

His love of maps, his keen interest in the representation of landscapes, and his rich visual imagination led Bob first to become proficient in manual cartography and then in Geographic Information Systems (GIS). He built one of the finest GIS/Cartography laboratories in New England, and regularly advised other colleges on how to build a GIS program. He also consulted with Vermont communities on how to use GIS for their planning.

Bob had a gift for making abstract, technologically challenging classes accessible to all students, even to those who were technophobes. He loved his students and cherished the long-lasting friendships that developed. He patiently devoted hours to helping students overcome their difficulties in

his classes, and often co-authored articles with students – a reflection of his commitment to teaching both in and out of the classroom.

His commitment to the advancement of geography beyond the college classroom was recognized by the National Geographic Society. Bob headed the Vermont Geographic Alliance, coordinated the Geography Bee for the State of Vermont, and was a regular consultant to the National Geographic Society and Princeton's Educational Testing Service. Bob's record of publication reflects his shift from physical geography to cartography and GIS. His early publications about slope morphology and runoff appeared in leading geography journals, and his later publications found homes in prestigious journals like *Cartographica* and *Cartographic Perspectives*. He was a recipient of grants from The National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.