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Walter Capps documentary highlights brave conversations and public service

About 10 minutes into the new documentary about the late Walter Capps, the storyline hits a stride in step with what many scholars and former students consider his most revered work as a professor of religious studies at UC Santa Barbara. Starting in 1979, Capps began to steadily fill the campus's 860-seat Campbell Hall with rapt attention to a controversial subject still very much poignant years after peak public outcry: the Vietnam War.

Capps's class, "The Impact of the Vietnam War on American Religion and Culture," brought in veteran combat soldiers, prisoners of war, nurses, conscientious objectors and many other guest speakers to discuss the traumas and life-or-death moral decisions common to wartime.

"It was life changing," veteran Shad Meshad says in the documentary. "[The class] set so many of those veterans free. They were able to open up their wounds, their hearts, their experiences. And of all people — these 19 and 20 year olds are listening to our stories and welcoming us home."

The film, "A Tribute to Walter H. Capps: Scholar, Teacher, Public Servant," screens at 6 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 21 via a [Zoom Webinar](#) hosted by UCSB's [Walter H. Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion, and Public Life](#). The event is free and open

to the public; there will be a post-screening discussion with the filmmakers and members of the Capps family, including his widow and former U.S. Representative Lois Capps, and daughter, Santa Barbara County Supervisor Laura Capps.

“The film grew out of a [2023 celebration](#) of Capps’s career, which brought many of his colleagues and students back to Santa Barbara,” said Greg Johnson, director of the Capps Center. “Dusty Hoesly (the center’s associate director) had the idea to record interviews with participants in the event, and this became the starting point of the larger project. We realized we had a living archive of voices to help tell Walter’s story about the joy of teaching and learning, the power of civic engagement and the human quest for meaning.”

The 75-minute documentary, produced locally by Black Diamond Productions and directed by company founder Julie Ross, reaches back to Capps’s Nebraska birth during the Great Depression and his early path toward ordained ministry before a course change set him on scholarly paths to UCSB’s nascent Department of Religious Studies, where he started teaching in 1964. Capps became a pioneer in the field, particularly Christian theology, and one of his many books, “Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline” (Fortress Press, 1995) remains a foundational text.

In addition to his Vietnam class, Capps’s impactful work with students included “Religion and Politics in America Today,” a class featuring senators and other high-level elected officials from both sides of the political aisle and discussions with conservative and liberal pundits from the national media. Capps also introduced many of his students to the ethics surrounding issues of race, sexuality, disability, rape, incarceration and addiction, among other hard conversations with guest speakers in “Voices of a Stranger.”

Beyond academia, the documentary covers his campaigns to win a congressional seat, his sudden and untimely death in 1997 and the establishment of the Capps Center to honor his legacy of public service as a principled and compassionate humanist.

Before we are anything else, Capps would say, “We are human beings first of all.”

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About UC Santa Barbara

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