

A Celebration of Joe Pratt and His Gifts to Others

By Debbie Harwell

It is with great sadness we share the news that our founder and friend Joe Pratt passed away on Saturday, September 20, 2025. Beloved by family, friends, colleagues, and students, Joe brought joy to all who knew him. He always said people only have twenty stories and just repeat different versions of them. But Joe had many more stories, shared in his letters from the editor, revealing his wit and care for others.

Born October 6, 1948, Joe and his siblings grew up in Port Neches. His father, Woodrow Wilson Pratt worked at a chemical plant. Joe called men like his father who came from rural poverty “risk-takers,” betting their lives they could “expand their options.”

Joe’s dad taught his children the values of hard work and helping the community. “My dad raised me to pitch for the St. Louis Cardinals,” Joe mused. Baseball taught him geography and math and offered “a window into the world.”

Joe had twenty-eight aunts and uncles and about forty cousins. His mother, Ruth, took the children to gospel music “singings” and worked at a burger place, which had a side window for Black customers. Joe reflected, “Although some in our town did not preach or practice racism, few if any voiced opposition.” Like many in his generation, Joe became aware of racial injustice through sports, music, movies, books, and news coverage of civil rights.

Joe attended Rice University, but, he quipped, he first studied the oil industry during his “summers working in the labor gangs of oil and petrochemical plants ... I cleaned out tanks ... and scraped out carbon black residue for the large dryers used to make synthetic rubber.” He also worked twelve-hour days, seven days a week, laying pipeline in East Texas. He wrote his senior thesis on his dad’s union, the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers, and later became a preeminent oil and business historian.

Joe married his wife Suzy in 1969. The next year, just before Joe headed off to basic training, they visited Bolivar Peninsula, which Joe called “my first beach.” He gleefully shared the story of visiting a friend’s pink beach cabin. When they arrived the key fit but did not open the lock, so Joe climbed through a window and opened the door. Later he discovered they had missed a turn and were guilty of “breaking and entering” at the only other pink cabin.

Joe taught at UC Berkley, Harvard Business School, and Texas A&M before coming to the University of Houston. The recipient of multiple teaching awards, he taught graduate seminars and the large US History survey with equal ease,



Joseph A. Pratt, NEH Cullen Chair in History and Business.

telling stories to grab the students’ attention. In his last letter from the editor before retiring, Joe told of ringing Grandma Pratt’s dinner bell – renamed “the history bell” – to tell his students “it was time to come to order to learn some history.”

Memories of Joe flow effusively from former students and colleagues. Dr. William Kellar, a former student and colleague, recalled Joe’s passion for student success, noting Joe’s installation of a mirror in the Scholars Community with a sign above it saying “Success starts here.” Kellar reminisced, “Every student who passed through our offices looked into that mirror ... and realiz[ed] that their success in life started

with them.” Bernadette Pruitt credited Joe for her PhD (the first awarded in history to a Black woman at UH), saying, “[H]e had a vision for the University of Houston, one that involved seeing and embracing students of color, from working-class backgrounds ... as meaningful, extraordinary members of society.”

Joe approached teaching with humility, writing after he presided over graduation as interim dean, that he stood there as “a plant worker’s son masquerading as a university professor in academic robes instead of a hard hat.” But he was no imposter.

When Joe came to UH in 1986, he was reunited with his friend Marty Melosi who had started the Institute (now Center) for Public History (CPH). Melosi recalled, “When Joe joined the faculty at UH, I was energized. We spent the next several years scheming and planning on numerous CPH projects. This was a joy.”

In 2003, CPH, under Joe’s direction, began publishing what is now *Houston History*. He worked with community historians like Steven Fenberg who said, “Joe Pratt was my advocate and guide.” Students were an integral part of producing the magazine. Joe explained, “We created a pleasant place where ‘work’ often seemed like play.” And I can assure you, it did; we worked hard and laughed hard. Hopefully we still capture that fun that marks Joe’s legacy. At CPH’s thirtieth anniversary, Joe wrote, “Together with many others, [Marty and I] have built a sturdy outpost of history in a region long neglectful of its past.”

This tribute to Joe merely scratches the surface, and we plan a full retrospective in a future issue. For now, we offer our deepest sympathy to Suzy, Kate, Ryan, Felix, and Theo. We mourn the loss of our friend, celebrate a life well-lived, and give thanks we were lucky enough to be in Joe’s orbit.++