Jennifer MacKenzie, Teaching Professor of English emeritus at the University of Missouri–St. Louis, died October 1 at her home in Kirkwood, MO, at the age of 71.

The daughter and grand-daughter of English teachers, MacKenzie earned a BA in English and Religion/Philosophy from Principia College in Elsah, IL, and an MA in English Literature from Purdue. She joined the UMSL English department as a Lecturer in 1988, after 8 years in the same role at St. Louis Community College at Meramec, and she retired a full Teaching Professor in 2015.

MacKenzie was a versatile teacher who took on a diverse portfolio of courses: American Literature; Practical Criticism; ancient, modern, contemporary World Literature; Traditional Grammar; Classical Myth; First-Year Writing and Advanced Expository Writing; and Poetry Writing at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels. She was also prize-winning and well-published poet who spent several summers at the University of Iowa's Summer Writer’s Conference.

She is remembered by generations of students as a knowledgeable, passionate, dedicated, and rigorous instructor, and by her co-workers as a poised, diplomatic, and hard-working colleague. She was constantly tinkering with and innovating in her many courses, and endlessly curious and enthusiastic about matters of literature and language and their significance in our lives, a stance that can be summed up in the seven words she once used to describe her teaching philosophy: “All this is crucial; pass it on.”

In response to her passing, a number of her colleagues offered their reminiscences, some of which were part of a crowded memorial service that took place at Eliot Unitarian Chapel in Kirkwood on October 19. What emerges from these memories is a consistent picture of an admired and respected friend and colleague.

For Mary Troy, who served with her for many years on the MFA and other committees, “Jennifer was kind, smart, thoughtful, witty, and talented. I was in awe of her, often envious. The mark she left on me and others is definite and deep. At committee meetings, as others talked, argued, rambled, thought out loud, Jennifer listened, at least at first. When she did speak up, and she always did, we listened, her ideas clear, her statements concise, her suggestions eminently sensible. I would leave most meetings telling myself, next time I’m going to be more like Jennifer. I’ve got to be more like Jennifer.” Troy also expressed her amazement at Jennifer’s range of literary interests: “She would talk of Nigerian writers, Japanese writers, Indian writers, and I would scribble the names down on scraps of paper or once, like my students, on my hand, then try to find out more about them, as always, saying to myself, I’ve got to be more like Jennifer.”

“Jennifer loved what she did and seemed to get such delight from her vocation,” wrote Sylvia Cook, striking a very similar note: “In all conversations and discussions Jennifer was thoughtful and considerate. She was rarely the first person to offer her opinions on any topic but, when she spoke, everyone knew how seriously she thought about everything. She set high standards for herself, her students, and for all the rest of us. One student put it eloquently in a note about her: ‘I’ve rarely had a more passionate – or compassionate professor.’”
Barbara Van Voorden, her office mate in Lucas Hall for many years, also testified to her high standards, while reminding us that her commitment to professional rigor did not entail unrelenting seriousness. “Jennifer was a person of great integrity, intelligence, and kindness. She was a sensitive and careful reader and writer who set high standards for herself and her students. She was open and unpretentious, honest and fair . . . She was these things. But she could also be earthy and irreverent and hilarious. She was one of the greatest laughers I have ever known. Jennifer could laugh with her entire self and soul, giving herself fully to the moment without reservation . . . Jennifer loved to laugh at herself as well as at and with the world. She was always open to the moments of truth hiding in absurdity, and she shared them with relish.”

She is survived by Bruce, her husband of 49 years, as well as her son Joshua MacKenzie of Calgary, Canada; daughter Clare MacKenzie of Collingswood, NJ; grandchildren Nathan Murray MacKenzie (Calgary) and James Benton MacKenzie (Collingswood); and sister Ann Fisher-Wirth of Oxford, MS. The family has suggested that gifts in Jennifer’s memory be made to Heifer International or Doctors Without Borders.