

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH



McClellan: A man of the arts endures hard times

BILL McCLELLAN • bmcclellan@post-dispatch.com > 314-340-8143 | Posted: Monday, September 5, 2011 12:00 am

Not so long ago, Pier Marton seemed a picture of success. He taught at Washington University in the film and media studies program. His résumé included video shows at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum in New York. He owned a home not far from the university.

Reared in Paris and educated at UCLA, he had the sort of sophisticated background that appeals to the arts crowd. He traditionally got good reviews from his students at the end of a semester.

But life is fragile, and Marton's situation was never as secure as it seemed. He wasn't a professor. He was a senior lecturer, and he did not have tenure. He said he made the decision not to seek tenure when he arrived at Washington University from the Art Institute of Chicago 13 years ago.

He said he was warned that if he sought tenure, the school would make a decision in five years. If he were not given tenure, he would be out.

And tenure was no sure thing. On the other hand, if he accepted the position as lecturer and did not seek tenure, his employment would have no timetable. It would be dependent on the boss. That seemed a good path. Of course, the boss who hires you likes you. There is no guarantee about future bosses.

A future boss did not like Marton. "Every year, he would say, 'If I were you, I'd look for a job,'" Marton said.

Which he did, but perhaps with not a sufficient sense of desperation. On the other hand, he liked his job. He thought he was good at it.

Three years ago, he had a cerebral hemorrhage. He nearly died. He missed a semester and then resumed teaching.

A new department chair came in. She was, Marton said, cut from the same cloth as the old one. In other words, the new boss did not seem to like Marton.

In April of 2010, Marton was given a year's notice. He would not be rehired for the fall semester of 2011.

A university official declined to comment on Marton's case, but a year's notice seems more than fair. Few people are given a year to look for another job.

But how many jobs are there in film studies? Not many. Furthermore, Marton was approaching his 60th birthday when he began his job search. Also, he was about to be fired. That would raise red flags. Also, he was still weakened from the brain hemorrhage that had nearly killed him. He was competing in his job search against healthy, young graduates who would surely work for less than the \$60,000 salary Marton was making that final year.

He talked to a friend who had been let go from another university. "When you're fired, it's like you have the plague," she told him.

When he came back in the fall of 2010 for that final year, his colleagues were cheerful. Almost too cheerful. It seemed to Marton that nobody knew what to say.

"They'd say, 'How are you? How was your vacation?' like nothing had changed," he said. As the job search fizzled, another possibility arose. Last spring, former students began an online petition to save his job. Friends from the past wrote testimonials. So did people in the local arts community.

"I think Washington University would make a mistake, and even retreat from its own impressive educational standards, by turning its back on Mr. Marton," wrote Joe Pollack, longtime film critic for this newspaper and other media outlets.

Professor Frederick Sweet of the medical school wrote that losing Marton would be akin to earlier departures of R. Buckminster Fuller and Tennessee Williams.

A letter in the student newspaper last spring generated more than 70 online comments, most of them favorable to Marton.

The Riverfront Times wrote a story about him in May. I talked with him shortly thereafter, and he was hopeful that perhaps things would break his way.

That did not happen. A new semester is started. A newly hired person is teaching his old courses.

I visited Marton last week.

"I feel like roadkill," he said.

If he was once the picture of success, he is now a composite of economic woes. He said he can't afford the COBRA payments so he has no health insurance. He has a pre-existing condition, and a serious one. He said he went through most of his savings when he was out for a semester with the brain hemorrhage and now he is unable to pay his mortgage. He figures he will have to sell his house in a down market. And, of course, no job in sight.

He does have letters and emails expressing support from former students and friends. He showed them to me, and I was reminded of the effusive praise you might hear in a eulogy. Perhaps Marton read my mind.

"They are beautiful to me," he said. "But they are flowers on a tombstone."

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Story Discussion



PaolaL said on: November 26, 2011, 3:32 am

As a former grad student of his, this is what happened: Pier was let go despite the fact that 90% of his students claimed he was the best professor in their entire life. More than 50 worldwide alumni - who have meanwhile become successful professionals - created an online petition asking WashU to reconsider their decision (keeppiermarton.wordpress.com). Alumni also wrote to the Provost but those heartfelt letters were answered with a 'thank you for your note'. WashU never replied to the petition.

Pier Marton is not only a compelling artist with an important family history, he is first of all an exceptional teacher. This does not stop because he lost his job at WashU: he still supports many of his former students in a great variety of ways. Active with various film organizations in St. Louis, he is also writing theoretical texts and planning to create an online "School of No Media". In spite of WashU's utterly unfair decision, Pier remains for many of us an outstanding, unique resource.



AAD said on: September 11, 2011, 8:42 am

The student letters and emails expressing support for Pier are not "flowers on a tombstone". We care about what happens at our alma mater and we want to be proud alums. I, for one, received an excellent education at WashU. Pier was an absolutely essential part of that education. It is a mistake to let him go. I still have hopes that the University will amend this mistake and make me proud again. Thank you.



adobecharles said on: September 9, 2011, 2:56 pm

I have heard Mr. Marton speak on a few occasions, and there is no doubt in my mind that he is a first rank artist and professor. One can easily read what others, students and those highly respected in their fields, have said about him. In addition, he is a breath of fresh air in the Saint Louis community.

Mr. Marton is a man of history as much as he is a "man of arts." His father was active in the French Resistance during WW II, and was awarded the coveted Medaille de France by DeGaulle. His aunts were saved from certain death by Raoul Wallenberg in Hungary. His father was a very well-known artist and photographer who died much too young.

I am not suggesting that Wash U. keep him on board because of his family history. But I think his background informs a lot of his work, which bursts with heart and soul, and a sense of humanity that desperately needs to be recognized and encouraged in this community.



awret said on: September 6, 2011, 2:43 pm

As someone who has taught in various universities, I can sympathize with Mr. Marton. Academic intelligence doesn't equate with wisdom, or sometimes even with decency. But surely this story is more about students - and what they are missing. I checked what has been said about this man's teaching; here are some excerpts: "Pier's greatest lesson...is not something he told me, but something he made me feel: the absolute necessity of difficulty in art." And "I credit Pier for having the intelligence, patience and kindness...to help mold me into an award-winning director and artist. More than anyone else, I thank Pier Marton." And "Pier's passion for his craft is unrivaled, except possibly by his zealous attempt to uncover a similar passion within each student he teaches." Given these statements (and there are many many more) about how this man teaches, how can Wash U not keep him? Not because he is 60 or has no insurance or will lose his house, but because its students deserve the best.



Bill Hannegan said on: September 5, 2011, 12:29 am

Really mean and brutal treatment of a good man. Shame on Wash U! Honestly, I have never heard anyone associated with Washington University say one favorable word about that school. Despite a pretty, traditional campus, it sounds like a place without honor or loyalty.

