memories of John T Hollin
by Shelly Sommer
INSTAAR librarian, 2003-present

I had just joined INSTAAR in 2003 as a part-time librarian. I was still trying to figure out how to pronounce the word Quaternary and work an unfamiliar computer. John, who had the office next door to me, was unfailingly kind and dropped by regularly with new articles about scientific publishing, a better bus route home, and (memorably) an explanation that an air raid siren was going to be tested outside our office windows the next day.

He also once called me into his office to observe a large owl perched on the roof of the building next door. It was a long five minutes before I realized it wasn’t a live bird at all, but a kind of scarecrow for deterring pigeons from nesting on the roof. John had pranked me on my third day.

It was that same very dry humor that led John to express the concern that he might one day go downstairs to the movable shelving in the campus’ Earth Science Library and find “students pressed like flowers between the shelves.”

John’s office was an Aladdin’s cave of books and artifacts. While librarians are professionally trained to create order and access, many of us have a sneaking love of the densely-packed, lived-in chaos of the stereotypical professor’s office. John’s was the Platonic ideal of the type. Mysterious trunks propped up worktable surfaces, and the occasional rummage through a file cabinet showed voluminous correspondence with fellow researchers, students, and old friends side by side with annotated papers and the occasional misplaced bill. Stacks of books had overflowed the shelving along one wall and colonized the venerable couch; at last leaving room only for one person, reckless of avalanche, to sit carefully in between the piles. John gave us a number of rare field guides we’ve added to the INSTAAR library, and I cherish the penciled comments in his spidery hand on many of the pages.

John took everyone’s interests to heart. He did so with a light touch and in a way that made many of us feel included and valued. I’ll never have a better neighbor.