

By Associated Press

Print Page

September 28, 2015 3:46PM

SUNY New Paltz center to be named for longtime professor

NEW PALTZ, N.Y. (AP) — Governors come and go, political parties rise and fall and for nearly half a century, Gerald Benjamin has watched it all — and commented on much of it — as New York's pre-eminent political scientist.

It's not a role that has always endeared the distinguished professor at SUNY New Paltz to those in charge.

"The phone rings, I pick it up, and a voice says, 'Professor Benjamin, this is Hugh Carey,'" Benjamin said, recalling the first time a sitting governor called after reading one of Benjamin's critiques in a news article. Thinking it was a colleague's prank, Benjamin replied with some colorful language. "There's a little silence, and again he says, 'This is Huge Carey' and I knew it really was."

Benjamin, 70, will be honored Wednesday when SUNY New Paltz renames its Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach the Benjamin Center. The tribute may make Benjamin uncomfortable, but politicians and political scientists who know him say it's a fitting acknowledgment.

"Professor Benjamin is one of the wiser voices in state policy, born of years of dedicated study and a nonpartisan critique," former Gov. Eliot Spitzer told The Associated Press.

Named a professor at New Paltz in 1968, Benjamin completed his bachelor's degree at St. Lawrence University and a master's and doctoral degree at Columbia University. Over the years he's taught thousands of students, published reams of research, led the SUNY Rockefeller Institute in Albany and served as chair of the political science department and dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Since 2008, he has directed the center that will soon bear his name. The center works to leverage the college's research and educational strengths to serve the Hudson Valley region.

He's also directly participated in government: Benjamin served on the Ulster County Legislature from 1981 to 1993 and was chairman for two years. Gov. Mario Cuomo tapped Benjamin to be research director for a panel studying possible changes to the state constitution in the '90s; Spitzer later appointed him to a commission on local government reform. He once entertained the idea of running for Congress, further evidence that politics and government are more than just an academic pursuit for Benjamin.

"I'm much more interested in the utility of what I do," he said. "There are things that need to be changed, and I'm inclined to change them."

New Yorkers likely know Benjamin best as a regular commentator on current political events.

"Gerry is what I call a public intellectual, a civic person," said Baruch College political science professor Doug Muzzio. "He's superb at what he does, and he's a wonderful human being on top of it. Warm, generous and has a wicked sense of humor."

Benjamin is married and has four children — one is Albany journalist Liz Benjamin — and splits his time between residences in New Paltz and New York City. He said he has no plans to retire soon.

"He jokes about retiring, but he would just end up doing this from his living room," said Joshua Simons, a senior research associate at New Paltz who went to work for Benjamin after having him as a professor.

The professor's newest cause: advocating for a constitutional convention. Tighter campaign finance rules and a fairer redistricting process, he said, would improve government and help restore public faith in their democracy.

"We need a transformative moment," he said. "We have to think about this stuff. That's why I do what I do."



Gerald Benjamin