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Paul Engle, 82, Poet and Founder Of Writing Program at U. of Iowa

By WOLFGANG SAXON

Paul Engle, the poet and author who nursed the University of Iowa's writers' programs to international acclaim, died Friday at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. He was 82 years old and lived in Iowa City.

Mr. Engle died of a heart attack, his family said.

Winston Barclay, a spokesman for the university, said Mr. Engle, the co-founder of the International Writing Program at Iowa, was en route to Poland to receive the Government's Order of Merit when he died. The award was one of several such honors given to him by the home countries of participants in the program.

A Paul Engle International Writing Fellowship was being established by the University of Iowa Foundation at the Iowa City campus, Mr. Barclay said.

Among the writers who honed their talents in the program in Iowa City were Flannery O'Connor, Richard Kim, William Stafford and W. D. Snodgrass. Robert Penn Warren taught there, as did Kurt Vonnegut, Philip Roth and Vance Bourjaily.

Over the years, some 800 writers from more than 80 countries journeyed to the campus, where Mr. Engle directed the writing program with his wife, Hua-ling Nieh, a Chinese novelist. They formally retired in 1987 but continued to write and travel.

Last year, the Engles attended a reunion of International Writing Program writers in Buenos Aires, and Mr. Engle was the keynote speaker at the World Congress of Poets in Seoul, South Korea, where he and his wife were reunited with many writers from the program. In 1989, the Engles were guests of the Soviet Writers Union in Moscow and Leningrad.

Mr. Engle wrote and edited more than 20 books. He was a frequent contributor to poetry journals, and his book reviews often appeared in general-interest publications, including The New York Times.

Paul Engle was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on Oct. 12, 1908, and graduated from Coe College and the University of Iowa before taking advanced studies at Columbia University and Merton College, Oxford, where he went as a Rhodes Scholar.

He was a prize-winning poet by the time he returned to the University of Iowa to teach in 1937. As a professor of English, he directed the university's workshops in creative writing from 1966 to 1977. He and Ms. Nieh founded the International Writing Program in 1967.

At the time of his death, Mr. Engle was working on memoirs, and he and his wife were writing a book of reflections on their life together. Last year, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters gave him its Award for Distinguished Service to the Arts.

In addition to his wife, Mr. Engle is survived by two daughters from a previous marriage, Mary Burge of Palo Alto, Calif., and Sara Lausch of Hildesheim, Germany; two step-daughters, Lan-lan Wang of Los Angeles, and Wei-wei Wang Rupprecht of Bonn; and a sister, Katheryne Montague of Carmel, Calif.

Photo: Paul Engle (1984)