

## Editorial

# Donald S Coffey, a man who meant so much to so many

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This editorial/memorial article considers Donald S. Coffey as a person, scientific leader, mentor, and friend.

Not being sure when I might get the chance again, I wanted to take this opportunity to write about some of my thoughts about Donald S. Coffey, Ph.D.. Writing a piece about his influence on my life is a daunting task simply because it is like trying to conceptualize what my father meant to me. Other than my family, no one influenced me more, not only in the scientific realm, but equally as thoroughly, on a personal level. Don impressed and enlivened me and so many others with so many of his actions and ideas - his thoughts on theoretical biology, complexity, chemomechanics, chaos, symmetry, phase shifts, tensegrity, evolution, non linear dynamics, just to name a few, but I would have to say that above all that I treasured about Dr. Coffey, and there are many such things, it was his incredible love for people, all people, that I will always be inspired by. For this, I consider him to be one of the most true and devout people I have ever met, not in a conventional or evangelical sense, but as a beacon radiating and practicing the love that humans ultimately strive for. He guided, he moved, he encouraged, he communicated.

Don loved students, the most bright and promising ones, but equally as well, the more humble and steadfast. Other than family, there was no activity that took precedent over his interaction with students in the classroom, in his office, on a trip to NYC or Ocean City, in the hallway. As far as I could tell, he never told any of his students or colleagues that he was unavailable to meet with them, regardless of position,

whether it be Harold Varmus, a high school student, a first year undergraduate, a maintenance man, or a taxi driver, in Don's mind they all deserved his attention and time, and he did not deny.

A few personal remembrances: Although at times I was a little embarrassed by it, I secretly loved it when he would tell the story of Bill Isaacs according to DSC. He had collected a bunch of superfluous information on a trip to my old high school when he was asked to give a talk there - information that he managed to embellish and augment with enough fake news and alternative facts that made me appear so much more accomplished than I was in any realm of reality. The reason I got into the Hopkins Pharmacology Ph.D. program was not due to my less than sterling college GPA but rather to one of Don's "Patrick Henry speeches" with praise so undeserved that it rendered me unrecognizable. He was always, always our best advocate and made us feel 10x better about ourselves when we needed it most. After giving a talk particularly earlier on in my career, he would pass me a handwritten note as I walked back to my seat from the podium - there was truly no better feeling than being told how good a job you had just done. The truly amazing thing about each of these occurrences is just how many of us who knew Don have the EXACT SAME STORY!!!

We all know that just being around Don was fun - stories galore, both true and tall tales, all entertaining, enlightening, and many downright hilarious. Fun stuff - Don liked fun stuff - canyons, rockets, canoes, trips to fun places with the lab and the joy of his life Miss Eula, full con-

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tact volleyball against Larry Ewing's lab group, going out to eat, having a beer, eating sushi, telling jokes. I remember witnessing a joke telling session - a contest between Don and Josh Fidler, a very adept story teller in his own right, after one of the first scientific meetings I went to in the late 70's - I thought this is crazy - Richard Pryor had nothing on these two, I almost wet my pants laughing so hard. Don kept his sense of humor and love of fun and personal interaction right up 'till the end. The last time I saw him he was getting ready to give his talk to young investigators at the PCF meeting just a couple of weeks before he died. As usual, he had come across some breakthrough or new concept that was unconventional but fascinating, and paradigm shifting - he was so enthusiastic - he had not lost an iota of excitement for learning, inspiring and sharing his newfound knowledge with others. The sparkle in his eye was the same as I remember when I walked into his office on Brady 5 in June 1977 - his office with books stacked so high, over-filled ashtrays, papers, artefacts everywhere -

and I told him I wanted a job in his lab - he said in his best Tennessee, this is a urology department - why do you want to work here?! I don't remember what I said but I'm pretty sure it was pretty lame as I had really no idea why I wanted to work there; he must not have been looking for any particular answer - evidently he was willing to take a gamble, just being there talking with him was enough - he hired me on the spot and 40 years later I realize I was the one who hit the jack pot that day, with the best payout I could ever ask for. Love you, Don, and thank you for letting us be part of your adventure.

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