



IN MEMORIAM

Kent R. Wilson
Professor of Chemistry and Biochemistry
UC San Diego
1937 - 2002

Kent R. Wilson, Professor of Chemistry and Biochemistry at the University of California, San Diego, passed away on March 27, 2000 after a 14-month battle with prostate cancer. Professor Wilson was a beloved and respected member of the department, the University, and the international scientific community. Kent Wilson touched and enriched many lives and is sorely missed. His indelible personal and professional mark will long remain stamped on everyone who had the privilege of knowing him.

Kent Wilson lived his life with a vision of the science he wanted to accomplish and the department he helped build. For decades he dreamed of uncovering the most exquisite details of chemical reactions and of building the very best chemistry department in the world. His life sadly ended during one of the most productive and exciting periods of his career, evidenced by published work in the journals *Science* and *Nature* shortly before his death.

Professor Wilson was raised in a mostly Quaker community in Bryn Gweled Homesteads, Pennsylvania. His decision to become a scientist was inspired by prominent scientists in his community, by his own mischievous childhood experiments, such as rewiring the town's phone system, and by disassembling and repairing household appliances. His particular interest in chemistry began through a high school fascination with moonshine and fireworks, which he made using surplus World War II equipment.

Professor Wilson received his B.S. in chemistry from Harvard University. He completed his Ph.D. under the guidance of Harvard Nobel Laureate Dudley Herschbach at the University of California, Berkeley. Dr. Wilson shared a lab with a group of graduate students who would all become fellow pioneer laser spectroscopists: Dick Zare, Jim Kinsey, and Yuan Lee. Kent Wilson brought a love of exploration and learning to his life as a faculty member. He loved the freedom it gave him to be an adventurer and a buccaneer, to explore the unknown, to follow his own unquenchable hunger for knowledge, and to educate and inspire young minds.

His thirst for discovery and new frontiers led to many firsts that have endured the test of time as important contributions in several areas of chemistry. In the late 1960s he and his research group developed the technique of photofragment spectroscopy that enabled them to probe the unstable states of molecules. In the 1970s he used laser spectroscopy to unveil the chemistry of atmospheric pollution. In the 1980s he combined ultrafast laser experiments with computer simulations to develop an understanding of how reactions occur in solution. In the past 90s he led a very ambitious effort to use ultrafast beams of x-rays to probe and control chemistry. The techniques developed by Professor Wilson have had widespread application in fields as diverse as atmospheric pollution, ancient statue dating, chemical reactions in liquids, and the development of pulsed x-ray sources and laser microscopes for use in sophisticated analysis of biological systems.

Professor Wilson's approach to research was unique. He felt that the first key to success in difficult experiments was to search the world for the best young scientists to work in his laboratory. He believed that the second, and perhaps most important, key to success was to facilitate teamwork among his brilliant junior

collaborators. He was so proud of his international research team in the 1990s that he referred to them as his Dream Team, alluding to the highly successful U.S. Olympic basketball squad.

Professor Wilson was also one of the most innovative teachers at UCSD. For 30 years he pioneered the use of visualization technologies to make science more accessible to students of all ages. Many a student or postdoctoral researcher at UCSD remembered seeing Professor Wilson's films even in high school. He brought films and other visualization techniques to the classroom when these technologies were in their infancy. Instead of employing professional programmers in this effort, he relied on a hand-picked team of some of the brightest undergraduate students he brought together in a group he dubbed the Senses Bureau. Some of these students passed up other opportunities and specifically came to UCSD because of Professor Wilson's legendary invitation, their first opportunity to experience his formidable talents in the art of persuasion and negotiation.

Professor Wilson received numerous distinctions during his prolific career. He was a Fellow of the American Physical Society and of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Perhaps his most enduring legacy lies in the large number of his students and junior associates that went on to outstanding careers and achievements of their own all around the world.

In addition to his passion for science, Professor Wilson was instrumental in preserving large portions of Torrey Pines State Park. He shared a love of bodysurfing in the Pacific with his daughter Tasha and a love of books and music with his daughter Maya.

Kent Wilson is survived by his wife of 32 years, Lana Wilson, his daughters, Tasha Wilson, Maya Wilson Chakko, and his son-in-law, Matthai Chakko.

Kent has left an indelible mark and will be sorely missed by all whose lives he touched.

Russell Doolittle
Andrew McCammon
Katja Lindenberg, Chair