



IN MEMORIAM

Eliezer Benjamini
Professor Microbiology & Immunology, Emeritus
UC Davis
1930 - 2008

Eliezer (Eli, “Elly,” Ben) Benjamini was a traveler and it took him too many parts of the Earth, to varied scientific ventures, to the world of music, and to the world of angling. Professor Benjamini traveled from his place of birth in Tel Aviv, Israel, to the United States to study at the University of California, Berkeley where in 1952 he was awarded the Bachelor of Science degree in Entomology (Insect Toxicology.) In the same field of study, he received his M.S. in 1954 and Ph.D. in 1958. Professor Benjamini died on February 14, 2008 at the age of 79.

His early scientific studies were concerned with the mode of action and metabolism of DDT and other chlorinated hydrocarbon insecticides in resistant and non-resistant flies. Additional studies dealt with assays for chlorinated and organophosphorous insecticides in foods. While the Ph.D. was awarded in Berkeley, much of the work constituting his dissertation on organophosphorous cholinesterase-inhibiting insecticides was carried out at the Citrus Experiment Station at UC Riverside. Following completion of the Ph.D., Benjamini made a career-changing move as an assistant research scientist at the Laboratory of Medical Entomology, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, San Francisco, he studied the immunology and immunochemistry of allergy induced by arthropod bites. It started what became the lasting theme of much of his immunologic research with the relationship between protein/peptide structure (epitope) and specific immunologic responses. This extended into the breadth of topics: immunochemical studies on tobacco mosaic virus proteins, collagen, and acetylcholinesterase; antibodies to morphine and fentanyl; anti-tumor immunotherapy; and cellular immune response in an experimental fungal disease. These few lines cannot do justice to the quality and extent of his work acknowledged not only by their acceptance into high quality journals, but also by the long stretch of funding he received from NIH and NSF grants for over 20 years. This helped to support the work of graduate and postdoctoral students many of whom have, in their own right, established distinguished careers. Dr. Benjamini received the Faculty Research Award at the UC Davis School of Medicine in 1977, and in 1984 he received the Distinguished Scientist Award in Virology and Immunology from the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research in Texas.

Benjamini joined the faculty of the Department of Medical Microbiology in the new UC Davis School of Medicine as a full Professor in 1970. His instructional effort included teaching Immunology to medical students, undergraduate, and graduate students. He and fellow faculty member, Robert Scibienski, devised new courses for undergraduate and graduate students, and were leaders in the creation of the new Graduate Group in Immunology in the 1970's and which Benjamini chaired from 1977-1986. Benjamini's instruction of medical students, in particular, brought about an awareness of the challenge of multiple, concurrent courses borne by students and led to his creating the textbook “Immunology – A Short Course” which, despite its title, represented a substantial but readable coverage of Immunology. First published in 1988, the book is now in its fifth edition and has been translated into other languages and has enjoyed success as a textbook in other countries, as well as, in the United States. Benjamini also brought together University of California faculty members to produce the textbook, “Medical Microbiology – A Short Course,” in his service on University committees was extensive and conscientiously undertaken. However, he was deeply disappointed following one of these assignments. He was assigned to an ad hoc committee to investigate charges that a University of

California scientist had fabricated data; Benjamini and other distinguished faculty members found substantiation of the charges. However, neither the campus nor University- wide administration appreciated the gravity of the ad hoc committee's findings and inadequately pursued the matter and applied no sanctions.

Benjamini, who became a citizen of the United States in 1962, was fluent in English, German, Hebrew, and Russian, and had a speaking and reading knowledge of French. These served him well not only academically, but also in his sense of humor. He was raised in Palestine, was a citizen of Israel, and maintained strong academic ties to the Jewish culture through his knowledge of Hebrew, Torah, and Talmud. However, he was generous toward many other cultures as exemplified, at least in part, by his varied colleagues and students. His geographic travels took him to almost all the continents. Even after his initial serious cardiac surgery, and the later heart transplant he undertook challenging long trips.

Benjamini was a violinist – he claimed he “played the fiddle” – expert enough to play as first violinist in the Camellia Symphony Orchestra of Sacramento, and in the University of California, Davis Symphony Orchestra. His range covered classical to country and he would share his music with guests at very lively gatherings of students, colleagues, and neighbors at his home.

The versatility of Benjamini was evident also in his fishing activities. Ocean fishing, river or creek fishing- all were undertaken with gusto. As described by a fellow angler who joined him for trout fishing in Putah Creek, several miles west of the UC Davis campus, Ben's enthusiasm was such that he was not satisfied with a single pole, but rather he was likely to fish with two poles giving him twice the excitement. He had a great sense of humor and loved to tell and hear stories and jokes, even when he was very ill. His knowledge of foreign languages enhanced his own jokes.

Benjamini and his wife Joy had two children, Ethan and Laurie. After his retirement in 1991, Benjamini and Joy moved to Huntington Beach. Following Joy's death, Benjamini met and married Leslie who heroically helped sustain him through very stressful final years following a heart transplant in 1998 and mounting complications necessitating hemodialysis.

In view of his distinction in scientific research, teaching and public service, Professor Benjamini outstandingly represented the University of California.

Demosthenes Pappagianis
Lawrence Rappaport