

Michael Dennis Whalen

May 6, 1950 — December 27, 1985

In his short lifetime Michael Dennis Whalen lived fully. He established a fruitful and promising academic career, and his genuine interests in others and the happenings about him gave richness to his life.

Michael was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, but spent the greater part of his childhood in Texas, where his wide-ranging and insatiable curiosity introduced him to subjects as diverse as astronomy and philosophy. In 1968 he entered the University of Texas at Austin as an anthropology major. Following an interlude of one semester at the University of Montana and a shift of interest from anthropology to botany, he received his B.S. degree from Texas in 1972. He remained at the University of Texas for his doctoral studies and was awarded the Ph.D. degree in 1977.

In the fall of that year, Michael joined the faculty of the L. H. Bailey Hortorium with a joint appointment in the Section of Ecology and Systematics. His appointment was of particular significance, for the hortorium was in the midst of change from a unit of relatively narrow research to one of more-typical academic nature. His arrival was a signal of change and revitalization.

A true academic, Mike focused his energies on teaching and scholarly research. He revitalized the introductory taxonomy course, combining the field experiences that had always characterized the course with a modern view of systematics. In a similar way the advanced course in systematics and evolution responded to his touch, as did a new course in biogeography. His infectious smile, sense of humor, gentleness, and easy manner, coupled with remarkable knowledge and a true interest in students, made him more than popular with both undergraduates and graduates. They found in Michael a teacher of extraordinary ability.

None would deny, however, that, for Michael, the plant genus *Solanum* was the focal point of his academic life. From it all other activities radiated and returned. Innovative approaches, involving both classical and modern techniques, are amply evident in his work. His publications are models of clarity, and representative of his incisive and imaginative thinking. He was widely recognized among others involved with this very large and economically important genus as its leading student. His studies of the basic biology and evolution of the *Solanum* species, which include the potato, eggplant, naranjilla, and, by some thinking, the tomato, promised to cast light on relationships within the genus and lead to improvement in humanity's store of basic crops. In the acknowledgments of his last major publication, which dealt with one segment of *Solanum*, Michael revealed a bit of himself and his fascination with this group of plants. "My first thanks go to the prickly solanums of the world. Their diversity was my principal

inspiration.” He was unfailingly generous with time and knowledge and brought all who worked with him into the heart of his research program.

Michael participated conscientiously and effectively in hortorium and university activities. He was particularly concerned with the future of the university’s natural areas, which he used so extensively in his teaching. Through his membership on the Cornell Plantations Committee he worked to strengthen that aspect of university resources. Yet, above all else, Michael was his own person. He was at his best following his own inclinations and pursuing his own intellectual goals. He plunged into new interests with abandon, being consumed by them until he felt he had mastered that which they could give him. In his final illness he displayed unimaginable courage and self-awareness and in his own strength reached out to help others.

He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth Lawson Whalen; their two children, John, ever known as Jack, and Charlotte; his parents, John M. and Jean Knight Whalen; and three brothers and a sister.

David M. Bates, Peter L. Marks, David A. Young