



Richard P. Korf

May 28, 1925 – August 20, 2016

Professor Emeritus Richard Paul Korf '46, Ph.D.'50 died on 20 August 2016 at the age of 91. He was born in 1925 and was a native of Bronxville, New York, with homes in Westchester County, New York, and in New Fairfield, Connecticut. He attended the Riverdale Country School in New York City and he subsequently wrote that he “chose Cornell University for study with the vague notion that I might like to become a gentleman farmer.” He had retired officially, but not actually, in 1992. At Cornell, Dick became fascinated by a group of organisms known as the fungi, and he studied them all of his life.

Dick was an internationally renowned mycologist (a person who studies fungi). He specialized in the taxonomy of a group of fungi called the “discomycetes” or cup fungi. Except for an initial year as a lecturer at the University of Glasgow (1950-1951), his entire career was at the university he loved, Cornell. As a mycologist, he identified and clarified the taxonomic position of hundreds of discomycetes. His contributions to the taxonomy of these organisms is solidified in their nomenclature; his colleagues have named at least three genera and 16 species after him. One of these is the false morel, *Gyromitra korfii*, which is common in the Ithaca area. He also helped shape international rules for naming plants and fungi, leading to a clearer and more stable system of nomenclature. A major accomplishment was his conception, launch, support, and publication of the journal MYCOTAXON with Belgian mycologist Grégoire Hennebert. This journal supports the inexpensive and rapid publication of formal descriptions of fungi new to science.

A major part of his accomplishment was the mentoring of 37 pre- and postdoctoral students who cherish his influence on their lives. They describe him as “ever youthfully exuberant, generous and hospitable.” Many experienced a sojourn at his cabin on Exe Island, which, in addition to his lab, “was a mecca for students and scholars from around the world.” He was an inspirational mentor.

These students were remarkably diverse in nationality and social position, but each felt valued. “There was never any doubt that his students were his academic family.” But he was also a demanding mentor and editor, and could be “gruff and forthright.” His students remember him as reviewing manuscripts with “a vengeance.” These students matured into very accomplished mycologists and seven of them went on to eventually follow him as presidents of the Mycological Society of America.

Dick was a force in the classroom – teaching a series of mycology courses. His courses dealt with the basic biology, ecology and taxonomy of the fungi. These basic biology courses were highly regarded in a department that had an applied, agricultural emphasis. Each class had a lab and in many, students were required to collect fungi, and then to observe them microscopically at the bench. Faculty in the department required that their students take such courses, because they respected the high quality of instruction. His faculty colleagues knew him to have the highest integrity, to be a sage counselor, to be a fearless defender of scientific freedom, and to be an unflappable liberal.

Collecting fungi in the field was a major pleasure for Dick – whether the “field” was at Beebe Lake, on Ringwood Road, or in the tropics. His enthusiasm at finding a tiny fungus on a twig underneath the leaf litter was contagious. “‘Sacrebleu!’ was a favorite profanity” at finding such a fungus. Collecting such findings was also important. He believed collections to be crucial to science and once said “above all, leave a luxurious legacy of data for future taxonomists to build upon.” He certainly did so. Throughout his career, he was the proud steward and Director of the Cornell University Plant Pathology Herbarium, from which his specimens continue to serve students and professionals around the world.

Dick loved the theater, and he acted on stage during his entire time at Cornell. He started as an undergraduate and he continued during his career into post-retirement. He had a booming baritone voice that is recorded in a 12 CD set of his reading of Stephen Vincent Benét’s “John Brown’s Body”. Dick’s advice to students was to avoid administrative work until late in a career, and he followed that advice. Interestingly (and reflecting his love of theater), at Cornell his only term in administration was as interim chair of Cornell’s Department of Theater Arts in 1985-1986.

Dick’s awards and recognitions are numerous and well-deserved. He received the Ainsworth Medal for extraordinary service to the international mycological community (2010); he was a Centenary Fellow of the British Mycological Society; and he was named a “Distinguished Mycologist” by the Mycological Society of America (1991). His teaching was

recognized by receipt of the “Distinguished Teaching Award” (1993) from the Cornell chapter of Gamma Sigma Delta, and he received the New York Chancellor’s Award for Teaching in 1992.

Dick’s family further exemplifies his love of science and art. His beloved wife Kumi Korf is an architect and artist in Ithaca. Daughter Mia Korf is an actress. Son Ian Korf is a bioinformatician at the University of California. Son Mario Korf is in computer software. Daughter Noni Korf creates educational software.

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