



## **Robert H. Wasserman**

February 11, 1926 – May 23, 2018

On May 23, 2018, Cornell University mourned the loss of James Law Professor Emeritus, Robert H. Wasserman, an esteemed colleague, friend and beloved family member. Professor Wasserman was born to Joseph and Sylvia Wasserman, in Schenectady, New York on February 11, 1926. His first experience at Cornell, and Ithaca, was after enlisting in the United States Army. At age 17, he arrived in Ithaca for ROTC training. Once he turned 18, he was sent to Georgia for basic training, and then to Europe in Fall of 1944. After WWII concluded, he returned to Cornell where he earned his B.S. degree in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and subsequently his M.S. degree at Michigan State University. His formal education concluded with his award of the Ph.D. degree at Cornell in 1953.

Professor Wasserman began his career as an independent scientist at the Atomic Energy Commission Project (AECF), at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where he advanced rapidly to the position of Senior Scientist. Dr. Wasserman was a vibrant member of the Cornell University faculty from 1957-1998. He served as Department Chair, for the Physiology Section, from 1983-1987, and in 1989 was named as the James Law Professor of Physiology. His research at AECF, and later at Cornell, provided novel insights into calcium homeostasis and mineral transport mechanisms in the intestine.

Many awards were conferred on him for this groundbreaking work. Prominent amongst them was his appointment to the National Academy of Sciences in 1980 for his discovery of the hormonal nature of Vitamin D through its induction of a calcium binding protein (now known as Calbindin) in cells of the intestine. At the National Academy of Sciences, Dr. Wasserman Chaired the Committee on the Scientific Basis of Meat and Poultry Inspection, and was a member of the Food and Nutritional Board.

Additional awards include the Mead Johnson Lectureship at Iowa State University, the Lichtwitz

Prize of the Institut National de la Sante et de la Recherche Medicale in Paris, the MERIT status award of the National Institutes of Health, the William F. Neuman Research Award from the American Society of Bone and Mineral Research, and the Career Recognition Award from Vitamin D Workshop. He was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship twice: in 1964-1965 to work with colleagues at the University of Copenhagen, in Denmark, and in 1972 to work with researchers at the University of Leeds, in England.

As an engaged scholar, Wasserman served on the editorial boards of multiple scientific journals, including *Proceedings of the Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine*, *The Cornell Veterinarian*, *Calcified Tissue International*, and the *Journal of Nutrition*. His distinguished scientific career impacting the field of nutrition was recognized in his election as Fellow of the American Institute of Nutrition.

As an academic, Professor Wasserman was recognized as a gifted teacher and role model for individuals who aspired to a career in science. Others knew him more informally through shared interests in the fabrication of furniture, sailing, music and card games. Students, faculty and staff benefited greatly from his comprehensive knowledge of mineral metabolism.

Other features of Professor Wasserman's research included a passion for accuracy and a penchant, whenever possible, to quantify the kinetics of chemical and biological reactions. Application of those skills in brilliantly conceived inquiries into basic biological mechanisms served him well in formulating hypotheses that could be tested definitively using techniques best suited to the task. His dedication to research was greatly admired. Many who had the privilege of working with him cited that experience as critical to their development as a discovery-based scientist.

Throughout his career, Professor Wasserman was recognized as an outstanding teacher and role model for individuals who aspire to discovery-based careers. Yet his impact on science was balanced by an unwavering devotion to his family. His wife Marilyn of 63 years predeceased him by five years, a loss made bearable only by the loving relationship as proud father and grandfather of his three daughters, Diane Wasserman Herrup of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, Arlene Wasserman of Ithaca, New York, and Judith Wasserman of Morgantown, West Virginia, and grandchildren Sofia and Ella Wasserman-Smith of Brooklyn, New York, and Madeline and Jacob Herrup of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Professor Wasserman was a remarkable person and an inspiration to all who knew him. He will long be remembered at Cornell.

*Written by Douglas McGregor*