



Leonard D. Topoleski

April 11, 1935 - February 8, 2019

Leonard D. Topoleski, professor emeritus of vegetable crops and horticulture, died February 8, 2019, at Guthrie Robert Packer Hospital in Sayre, Pennsylvania. He was 83.

Born in Ashley, Pennsylvania, he graduated from Ashley High School in 1953, where he played on the football team for three years and participated in the debate team and theater group. After earning B.S. (1957) and M.S. (1959) degrees from Penn State University, Len went on to earn his Ph.D. in plant breeding and genetics from Purdue University in 1962. That same year, he joined Cornell's faculty in the then Department of Vegetable Crops where he worked until his retirement as professor emeritus in 2001.

Professor Topoleski conducted research on vegetable crops, served as an extension educator and left a legacy as a popular teacher and student adviser. "He was an enthusiastic teacher of our undergraduate beginning horticulture course and, over his career, inspired many students with his love of plants," said Chris Wien, M.S. '67, Ph.D. '71, professor emeritus of Horticulture.

Professor Topoleski's research involved understanding incompatibility issues that arise when breeding different tomato species. He received training in the use of electron microscopy and became the department expert on using the technique for plant science research. He also researched greenhouse vegetable production, evaluating new growing systems and fertility management, assessing new varieties, and providing basic greenhouse tomato production information to new growers.

"Len's Ph.D. research in 1962 focused on grafted tomatoes and eggplants," said Steve Reiners, chair of Cornell's Horticulture Section. "He was really way ahead of its time as this research area has really taken off the last few years."

Although an active researcher, his biggest impact may have been as a teacher. "Professor Topoleski was revered by his students for his hands-on and engaging approach," said Frank Rossi, professor and extension turfgrass specialist in the School of Integrative Plant Science. "Students would be responsible for growing and studying the growth of plants from seed to

harvest each semester, a tradition I know my colleagues and I have attempted to maintain in our coursework today.”

Professor Topoleski’s general horticulture course (Hort 102) exposed hundreds of Cornell undergraduates to the world of fruits, vegetables, and landscape plants for the first time. His vegetable class was very popular, getting a whole new generation excited about horticulture. His teaching style focused on building horticultural skills and youth development through learning-by-doing. He also was an undergraduate adviser for as many as 30 students per year.

Michael Buthe, a class of 1983 Plant Science major valued his relationship with Professor Topoleski. “He was my student advisor during my undergraduate years at Cornell from 1979 to 1983. He was always very supportive of my desire to explore a diverse variety of coursework while ensuring I was on target to meet my requirements as a Plant Science major. He had a wonderful, calm demeanor, despite his deep voice and burly physique. I greatly appreciated his sound advice and always looked forward to our periodic meetings. He was also very passionate about his research, particularly his focus on tomatoes. He will forever be an important part of my fond memories of Cornell.”

Professor Topoleski also had an active extension program. Serving as the 4-H vegetable crops extension specialist, he trained agents, wrote highly regarded extension publications and guides, and developed new programs. “He was well-known and appreciated by 4-H and home gardeners all over the state,” said Elmer Ewing, professor emeritus of Horticulture. Len’s subject matter resources were the foundation of numerous county and state-wide horticultural programs.

Joann Gruttadaurio, retired senior extension associate in Horticulture remembered Professor Topoleski as one of a team of Extension faculty who set as a priority the education and development of students, youth, teens, and 4-H leaders. “He, along with Ernie Schaufler traveled the state to bring the latest and best resources to hundreds of Extension field staff, volunteers, youth, and the public”, said Gruttadaurio. She added, “Many of us who chose extension education as a career still look fondly on Len as one of our favorite mentors.”

Professor Topoleski had a passion for gardening, collecting antiques, photography, and every aspect of Cornell Athletics. He was a longtime communicant of St. Catherine of Siena Church, Ithaca.

He is survived by his loving wife of nearly 61 years, Janice; children Professor L.D. Timmie-Topoleski (Marc Chasnow, M.D.), Tamara Ann Topoleski, M.D. (Leonard Foffa), and Daniel T. Topoleski; grandchildren Mackenzie (Collin), Eliza, Fraser, Audrey and Delaini; sister Dorothy Johnson; and several nieces and nephews. For those who would like to honor Len in a special way, please consider a contribution to The LAST Foundation Inc., 1266 Shelter Rock Rd., Orlando, Florida 32835. This foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization, was formed in memory of his daughter-in-law, Lisa Ann, and helps local families with medical expenses associated with illness.

Written by Steve Reiners