

Sergio David Servetto

January 18, 1968 — July 24, 2007

Sergio David Servetto, Assistant Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering, died at the age of 39 in the early morning of July 24, 2007, in the crash of his recently purchased single-engine plane during the final segment of a trip from the Midwest to Ithaca. Sergio's enthusiasm for flying began in his native Argentina and was reawakened in Spring 2007 when he saw it as a way to be with his family in Ithaca for long weekends during a year he was about to spend as a visiting faculty member at Notre Dame. In a haunting coincidence, Sergio started his life in the United States in Urbana, Illinois, and ended it in Urbana, New York.

Sergio was educated first at the National University of La Plata in Argentina, after which he worked for three years as a programmer for IBM in Buenos Aires. He then came to the U.S. from 1994-99 as a graduate student in computer science and electrical engineering at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Upon graduation from UIUC, he received the coveted David J. Kuck Outstanding Thesis Award in Computer Science at UIUC. Sergio then joined the Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne, working for two years with the eminent Professors Martin Vetterli and Bixio Rimoldi. In 2001, he was offered an Assistant Professorship at Cornell and joined our ECE faculty.

Sergio was a colleague of great intelligence, intense conviction, boundless energy, and tremendous enthusiasm for research, teaching, and ideas. He maintained high ideals for himself and expected the same of others. His friends enjoyed his great personal warmth. Sergio was an individual of strong principle who believed with Theodore Roosevelt:

"The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena...who strives valiantly...and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly..."

He was widely read in his native Spanish as well as in German and English, and was known to quote aptly from Cervantes and Kafka. Sergio's restatement of the engineer's creed of "can do" was the proverb, "If there is no wind, row."

At his untimely death, Sergio was already highly regarded worldwide for his work in information theory and its applications to such areas as sensor networks and media compression. He had the respect and affection of many outstanding researchers in these specialties. In an unprecedented gesture, his professional society, the Information Theory Society of the IEEE, held a session at the September 2007 Allerton Conference on Communication, Control,

and Computing to honor him and his work. In addition, a Sergio Servetto Memorial Session was held in July 2008 at the IEEE International Symposium on Information Theory, where papers were presented that were cognate to Sergio's unremitting work on the challenging information theory problem of multiterminal source coding, in which two correlated sources are encoded separately subject to distortion criteria.

While Sergio was actively engaged in journal editorial work and served on technical program committees, his favorite professional outreach activity was the Student Committee of the IEEE Information Theory Society, the purpose of which is to interest graduate students in the discipline and then support their research endeavors. Sergio was a founding member of the Committee, established its website and had recently assumed the responsibilities of Committee Chair. He assiduously laid the groundwork for an ongoing School of Information Theory for graduate and post-doctoral students. Indeed, the First Annual School of Information Theory, held in June 2008, was dedicated to Sergio Servetto.

Sergio is survived by his beloved wife Viviana Sitz and his two young sons, Luciano and Alejandro.

Terrence L. Fine, Chairperson; Toby Berger, David A. Hammer