In Memoriam: Morris Rockstein, PhD (1916–2007)

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Dr. Morris Rockstein, a pioneer biogerontologist, former President of The Gerontological Society of America (GSA), and Chairman of Section B of the Entomological Society of America, died on June 19, 2007, at the age of 91 in Coral Gables, Florida.

“Rocky,” as he was known to his many friends, was born in Canada and became a United States citizen in 1934. He graduated magna cum laude as a Phi Beta Kappa student in mathematics at Brooklyn College, and in 1948 earned a PhD in insect physiology and biochemistry from the University of Minnesota. He subsequently served on the faculties of Washington State University, New York University, and the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, Massachusetts. From 1967 to 1971 he served as Professor of Physiology and Biophysics at the University of Miami School of Medicine, where he chaired the Department for 4 years.

I had the good fortune to meet Rocky in the mid-1960s when Nathan Shock persuaded me to attend an annual meeting of the GSA. I did so with some trepidation because I was unsure that I had correctly interpreted my findings as telling me something about aging.

Rocky was one of the more gregarious members of the society and, having read my work, he sought me out. A tall, lanky fellow sauntered up, introduced himself, and, in the ensuing conversation, learned that I thought that I might be at the wrong meeting because I was unsure that I had correctly interpreted my findings as telling me something about aging.

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He drew himself up to his full 6-foot-plus height, and looking at me straight in the eye from his lofty perch said, “Damn it, Hayflick, your studies are telling us as much about aging, and probably more, than are most other studies being done today.”

This was not a particularly flattering statement because in this country, at that time, there were probably no more than 25 research projects on biogerontology. “Furthermore,” Rocky said, “I want you to join the GSA.” He was then the President, so, thoroughly intimidated, I did.

Rocky’s contributions to biogerontology are breathtaking in their scope. They ranged from aging and longevity in several insects, longevity in the animal kingdom generally, the biochemistry of aging in the muscles of vertebrates and invertebrates, to the comparative biology and evolution of aging in animals and humans.

He was one of the first biogerontologists to recognize that the genetics of longevity differed from the stochastic processes of aging—a distinction that is still not understood by many in the field today. He edited three volumes of The Physiology of Insecta for Academic Press in 1964 and, 10 years later, oversaw a 2nd edition in 6 volumes. Rocky also organized a series of annual symposia that spanned a wide variety of subjects. Examples of some published by him and his associates are Theoretical Aspects of Aging and The Physiology and Pathology of Human Aging. The proceedings of all were published by him and his associates.

Rocky prided himself in educating many students about the discipline of biogerontology. His legacy is not only his scientific accomplishments but also a group of exceptional students that includes the names of several who achieved great success in the field.

People will remember Rocky, not only as a brilliant and dedicated scientist, but also as the affable and congenial fellow that he was. Many older members of the GSA can see him in their mind’s eye at what was then the traditional banquet and dance held on the last evening of the annual meeting. Rocky was an accomplished dancer and, having lost his wife early in marriage, he sought out the more accomplished dance partners to exhibit his terpsichorean skills. When, in his search, his inviting gaze fell upon a potential dance partner who was aware of her inferior ability, the lady in question would recoil in fright. These annually recurring incidents amused him (and others) greatly.

Rocky did not attend GSA annual meetings in his later years—so younger members of the Society did not know this extraordinary man. Those who did will miss benefiting from his broad range of scientific knowledge, his passion for teaching, his enthusiastic encouragement given to young students, and for his ability to do all of these things with the kindness and joy for which he was so beloved.

CORRESPONDENCE

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