Remembering David C. Beebe, PhD, 1944–2015

David C. Beebe, PhD, FARVO, IOVS Editorial Board Member for 18 years, IOVS Editor-in-Chief from 2013 to 2015, past president of ARVO, and 2015 Joanne Angle Award recipient, passed away on March 27, 2015 at the age of 70 from complications associated with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.

David was a highly talented scientist, teacher, and mentor. He was also a tremendously warm and caring individual with an enormous love of science, nature, and family. For David, the concept of family extended beyond his wonderful wife and three kids to include his collaborators and mentees as well as his scientific competitors. Since his passing, many have described David as a mensch, the Yiddish term for a person of integrity and honor. I am not sure that any word captures the essence of David better.

David inspired those around him. He inspired them to think beyond their normal limits and to take risks. Not surprisingly, one of his favorite movies was Risky Business. He inspired those around him to work collaboratively and to stand up for what they believe in. Also not surprisingly, as a young academic he lived on a commune. He inspired people around him to rise up to their fullest potential. This included members of his lab, as well as clinical faculty members whom David mentored into National Eye Institute–supported translational scientists. David was adored by his mentees.

Before he was a scientist, David was a sailor. He grew up sailing on Long Island’s Great South Bay. His family tells stories of his focus on and fascination with the physics of sailing. They also tell of his enormous success as a competitive sailor, his childhood home filled with sailing trophies, his very young solo triumph in the Queen of the Bay race held at the Sayville Yacht Club, and his team victory at the North American Intercolligate Sailing Championship. His appreciation for the laws of physics, laws that govern sailing success, remained with him throughout his career.

From his youngest days David was a naturalist with a love of the outdoors. He loved the water, fishing, and foraging for wild mushrooms. His family members tell stories of him suddenly pulling the car over to the side of the road to identify an interesting mushroom. They also tell of hours spent playing in the water.

David Beebe graduated with a BS in zoology from the University of Rhode Island followed by an MS in biomedical sciences from Brown University. He subsequently completed a PhD in biology from University of Virginia, where he received the Andrew Fleming Award as the outstanding graduate student in biology. This was followed by a postdoctoral fellowship at the National Institutes of Health and an assistant professorship in the Department of Anatomy at the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences, where he met his wife Betsy. Within 11 years of joining the Uniformed Services University he was Professor and Chair of the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology. His scientific interests were broad but were focused mainly on development of the eye, especially development of the lens. While at the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences he received two Golden Apple Awards from the medical students for outstanding teaching.

In 1995, David left the Uniformed Services University for Washington University in St. Louis to take the positions of Professor in Cell Biology and Physiology as well as Jules and Doris Stein RPB Professor in Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences. In 2002 he was named the Janet and Bernard Becker Professor of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences. Moving to St. Louis meant leaving frequent sailing trips behind, but he was highly motivated to join a department and institution where he could much more easily move his research into translational areas. Which is exactly what David did.

At Washington University he was known as a terrific colleague, an outstanding researcher, a superb lecturer, and the consummate mentor to students and faculty at all levels. He also began to collaborate with clinicians. He was fascinated by the association of age-related cataract formation with liquefaction of the vitreous and hypothesized that age-related cataract was due, in part, to exposure of the lens to elevated oxygen levels in the eye—a theory that he later went on to provide data for both in animal models and in humans. This led to a series of collaborations with clinicians at Washington University in which he collected data to support the role of elevated oxygen not only in the pathogenesis of cataract formation but also in chronic open-angle glaucoma.

David Beebe was a gentleman and a man of integrity. David Beebe loved science and took great care of those around him. He fought his illness with quiet courage and despite steady weakening showed up daily at the lab to meet with his research team. On the day before his passing he spent an entire day at work despite serious problems with his breathing. This included meetings with his lab, a meeting with me to discuss the potential clinical impact of his latest studies on the regulatory control of ocular surface epithelia, and his attendance at the late-afternoon vision sciences seminar. The entire day he was completely engaged and excited about his work. David will be missed deeply.

David is survived by his wife of 37 years, Anne-Elizabeth; three children, Peter, Colin, and Jessica; and four grandchildren.

Todd P. Margolis

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