

Herbert Wilf Memorial
Herman Gluck
January 14, 2012

HERBERT WILF - IN MEMORIAM

This past Monday at the Wilfs, after Cantor Rosner concluded the shiva services, a number of us spoke about our recollections of Herb.

My mind turned back forty-five years into the past, and I remembered coming to the mathematics department at Penn for the first time...

.. with the strange expectation that I would meet two kinds of faculty...those who did research and paid little attention to teaching, and those who taught and paid little attention to research.

But then I met Herb Wilf, a terrific mathematician and a star teacher, conveniently packaged into one body. Of course, in Herb's case, there was room for both.

Herb set the style and standard for the mathematics department at Penn, where we could keep math research as our top priority, and yet invest substantial energy towards our teaching mission, and aim to be really good at, and enjoy doing, both.

Thanks to Herb's leadership over the years, our department not only flourished mathematically, but gradually acquired more than its share of prize-winning teachers.

But Herb always led the way.

He was the first among us to win in 1973 the university-wide Christian and Mary Lindback Award for excellence in undergraduate teaching.

And then wider recognition with the Award for Distinguished Teaching of Mathematics, given in 1995 by our local section of the Mathematical Association of America.

And then wider still...now on a national scale...with the Deborah and Franklin Tepper Haimo Award for Distinguished Teaching, given by the Mathematical Association of America in January 1996, one of just three awards of the national association.

And then, to make sure we knew that he was still paying attention to math, Herb won in 1998 the Leroy P. Steele prize of the American Mathematical Society for Seminal Contribution to Research...jointly with Doron Zeilberger...one of the highest possible awards in mathematics.

And more recently, the Euler Medal of the Institute for Combinatorics and Applications, in March of 2004.

In short, the world acknowledged what we already knew, that Herb Wilf was a first class mathematician and teacher, and that he enjoyed being both.

Moreover, Herb in the field of combinatorics combined forces with Peter Freyd in logic and foundations, with Gene Calabi in Geometry, Dick Kadison in Analysis and Murray Gerstenhaber in Algebra, to make our department at Penn a world center for mathematics, magnetically attractive to all, and at the same time a warm and inviting place to live or to visit.

Indeed, on an inter-personal level, the math department at Penn has for a very long time been like an overgrown family, whose members count one another among their very best friends, and who enjoy each another in many ways far removed from academia.

With Ruth and Herb Wilf, for example, Doris and I would vacation together, visiting them at their home in Loveladies on the Jersey coast, where Herb and I shared our passion for body surfing in the ocean, or at Vero Beach in Florida, where we enjoyed sun and camaraderie...

...and many times on the tennis courts, playing family style doubles, with Ruth and Herb lined up against Doris and me.

On the tennis courts, we called her "Ruthless" for the power of her driving forehand, which you could feel in your shoulder joints if you were foolish enough to go head to head with her...

...and for many dinners together, mostly at Chun Hing Chinese Restaurant, far and away our favorite.

A few nights ago, Ruth reached even further back into the past to Herb's undergraduate days at MIT, and told us how enormously pleased he was when in 1951 he won the Julius Adams Stratton prize for public speaking on a scientific subject by an undergraduate, and how encouraged he felt by such recognition.

This incident was in their family's mind, Ruth told us, when they decided that a nice way to honor Herb's memory would be to establish an award at Penn recognizing outstanding student achievement.

Donations to this fund may be sent to the Department of Mathematics at the University of Pennsylvania, and Ruth cautioned us that some of the obituary notices for Herb gave the wrong street address.

The correct one is 209 South 33rd Street in Philadelphia.

This morning, our son Mark sent the following message to Ruth:

Dear Ruth,

Thinking of you.

The loss of Herb reminds me of all the wonderful times we had together, and how much of a virtual Uncle Herb was to me over the 45 years I have known you two.

Our time together at Stanford was especially meaningful when you filled a gap in my life by standing in as virtual parents. I often tell the story of how, when I was telling Herb about my thesis research he broke out in a wide grin and laugh, explaining how hearing me talk about my science reminded him so much of Herman and made him nostalgic for similar math talks with Dad -- he pointed out that it was not only the cadence and tone of my voice that sounded like Dad, but the way I organized my thoughts and ideas, presented the motivation for the research step by step for the listener, all made him feel like he was hearing Herman channeled through me.

Our flight to Monterey was a big thrill and when Herb allowed me to fly the plane for a bit over the Santa Cruz Mountains that was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity (still never repeated).

I send you a warm hug and look forward to seeing you again soon.

- Mark

You can't really summarize a good life in words, you just watch, observe and aim to appreciate and absorb.

Herb and Ruth's love and respect for each other, for their children and grandchildren, relatives and friends, serves as a beautiful model for all of us.

It is the kind of life that Doris and I try to live ourselves...

...it is the kind of life that we wish for our children and grandchildren...

...it is the kind of life that we wish for all of you here today

...upon whom Herb and Ruth have already spread their warmth and love.