Obituary

J.M. White

by Charles T. Campbell
Editor-in-Chief

On Aug. 31, I received a phone call from D. W. (Wayne) Goodman with the devastating news that my Ph.D. advisor, mentor, friend, and colleague, J. M. (Mike) White, had suddenly passed away from an unexpected heart problem. Many of you are, I am sure, equally saddened by this news. Mike was one of the pioneers in the type of surface chemistry covered by this journal, himself publishing 146 papers in these pages, which have received a total of over 5000 citations. Mike graduated more than fifty doctoral students and published a total of over 650 scholarly articles during his forty-one years at The University of Texas at Austin. Many of his former students and postdocs now lead research groups that have contributed countless papers to this journal. Mike was a consummate teacher, and those of us fortunate enough to have known him cherish the lessons he taught us. Some of these were about surface science. More were about living.

Mike's research has been recognized internationally, and he is among the most frequently cited chemists in the nation. His research interests spanned a wide range of topics related to surface and materials chemistry, and he was one of the pioneers in photochemistry. His contributions to the scientific community include ingenious exploitation of the techniques of surface physics for investigating surface chemical problems. He was absolutely convinced of the societal benefits that would result from fundamental research in surface science, especially concerning solving problems related to energy and the environment. He was infectious in his enthusiasm for that endeavor.

His accomplishments were recognized by many awards, including two national awards from the American Chemical Society. Those he likely treasured most were his election to The University of Texas Academy of Distinguished Teachers, the Jean Holloway Teaching Excellence Award, and the Texas Blazers Faculty Excellence Award. Mike was the Norman Hackerman Professor of Chemistry for 15 years before being named to the Robert A. Welch Chair in Chemistry. He served a term as Chair of the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry at The University of Texas at Austin, and was Director of one of the first NSF Science & Technology Centers for many years. He also spent time doing research with Gerhard Ertl (recipient of the 2007 Nobel Prize in Chemistry) and his group at the Fritz-Haber Institute in Berlin as a Humboldt Senior Scientist Awardee. In 2004, Mike began a joint research appointment with Pacific Northwest National Laboratories (PNNL). Under his leadership, the Department of Energy established the Institute for Interfacial Catalysis at PNNL, and in February, 2005, he was named its first Director. Mike was also very active in his service to his local church, and contributed much volunteer service to the Austin Graduate School of Theology. For example, he helped write the document and compile the data for its accreditation as a degree-granting institution and served as chair of the committee that selected its current president. Most importantly to himself, he was a loving husband, father, and granddad.

Mike delighted in showcasing the gifts of others, and in doing so, he urged us on to higher accomplishments. He never missed an opportunity to thank others for something they had done. He did not allow himself much time (if any) to sit back and enjoy the earthly fruits of his labor, nor did he lower his expectations of others when he knew that meeting these high expectations would bring someone a new level of understanding, achievement, and satisfaction, or help solve the world’s problems. He taught, by example, to treat others with respect and generosity, regardless of their status or influence. I probably remain his worst student in this respect, but still I recognize this trait in abundance within his other former students and colleagues, and still I am trying.

As Mike often said to many of us, with his multiple levels of meaning: “Press on!”

doi:10.1016/S0039-6028(07)01055-2
Acknowledgements: I would like to sincerely thank Pam Cook, who was Mike White’s assistant for 27 years at The University of Texas at Austin, for allowing me to copy above (with slight modifications) some of her thoughts from a written copy of her eulogy for Mike, which she so kindly provided. I also thank Dr. Bruce E. Koel for helping me with this editorial.