



Marilyn J. Woolkalis

June 16, 1951 - June 19, 2008

Marilyn J. Woolkalis, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, 57

Marilyn J. Woolkalis, Ph.D., an associate professor of physiology at Thomas Jefferson University died of ovarian cancer Thursday in her home in Rosemont.

Born in 1951 into an Air Force family in Gulfport, Mississippi, Dr. Woolkalis lived briefly in New Jersey and Morocco. Starting in 1955, her family lived in Falmouth (Cape Cod), Massachusetts. Dr. Woolkalis's love of science blossomed when, as a senior in high school, she worked at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI). She then attended Smith College from 1969-1973 where she obtained her A.B. degree in biology. After college, she worked at the Rockefeller University in New York City and again at WHOI. In 1975, she moved west to attend the University of California at Davis. There she classified the evolutionary relationships of bacteria of the genus *Vibrio* (which includes the pathogen that causes cholera) and received her Ph.D. in Microbiology in 1981,

Dr. Woolkalis did postdoctoral research at Tufts Medical School in Boston and at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1992, she joined the faculty of Thomas Jefferson University where she held the rank of Associate Professor of

Physiology at the time of her death.

Although Dr. Woolkalis started her scientific career as a microbiologist, she shifted to cell biology upon returning to the east coast, focusing primarily on signaling processes in mammalian cells. At Jefferson, she concentrated her research on the vascular endothelium, the cell layer lining blood vessels. However, after her diagnosis in 2005, she became intensely interested in the signals controlling the growth of ovarian cancer cells and had just received a grant from the Department of Defense for this research when she became acutely ill from the disease.

Dr. Woolkalis was a dedicated teacher of medical and graduate students and was honored in 2007 with the Dean's award for education. As a researcher, she was highly respected for her technical expertise, integrity, scientific insights, and constructive criticism. Many young scientists sought her out for advice and mentorship. She was well-known for her pleasant smile, characteristic wit, and friendly, approachable manner.

She was a devoted mother, wife, daughter, sister, and a friend to many. She and her husband, George L. Gerton, Ph.D., whom she met in graduate school and married in 1983, have a daughter, Julia. After her cancer diagnosis, one of Dr. Woolkalis's primary goals was to see her daughter graduate from high school, which Julia did a few weeks ago. Dr. Woolkalis and a network of friends with cancer supported each other during her illness. She was an inspiration to many who watched her deal with her cancer therapies, including any clinical trial she could enroll in. She worked continuously throughout her illness until the past two months when the disease overcame her resistance.

Besides her husband and daughter, Dr. Woolkalis is survived by her mother, Mary Louise, her brother, David, and his son, Brandon.

A memorial service will be held on Tuesday, July 1 at 3:30 PM at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, 625 Montgomery Avenue, Bryn Mawr. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made in Dr. Woolkalis's name to Chanticleer Garden, 786 Church Road, Wayne, PA 19087 or to the Ovarian Cancer Research Center, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, University of Pennsylvania, 3400 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

Previous Events

Service

JUL 1. 3:30 PM (ET)

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
625 Montgomery Avenue
Bryn Mawr, PA

Tribute Wall



“ *Marilyn was a very special person to me. Aside from helping in my training as a graduate student at Penn, she was a dear friend and comrade. I always looked forward to seeing her later at conferences and sharing again in that lively bubbly laughter and easy sarcastic wit. She struck a great balance between diligent scientist and dedicated wife and mother. Marilyn touched us with her spirit, and while she will be sorely missed, we all are fortunate to have shared in her life. Best wishes to George and Julia.##imported-begin##Karen Lounsbury##imported-end##*

July 29, 2008 at 12:02 PM



“ *I was so sad to hear the news from my friend Kate Hollinger Yurick, another former student of Dr Woolkalis. Kate, and I used to study together with other friends outside of Dr Woolkalis's office. It was a quiet area, and we were supported and encouraged by Dr Woolkalis through some very difficult years of medical school. My best to her husband and daughter, as well as the rest of her family. Katy Oehler##imported-begin##Katy Oehler##imported-end##*

July 06, 2008 at 03:17 PM



“ Dear George and Julia,

Marilyn was so important in my life in so many ways. She was my first true mentor, encouraging me to pursue a career in medicine not only by encouraging words but also by example. We often spoke of the challenges of being a woman in science, balancing career and family, finding time to enjoy things that are important to you. I also found comfort in that fact that she wasn't always "perfect"; sometimes reaching your goals isn't always a graceful pursuit. My favorite memories of Marilyn include hearing her talking to herself in her office while I would be working in the lab, her reaction to my laundry strewn across your family room when you came back from vacation, and stories of the naughty cats. I am so thankful for Marilyn's support, guidance and friendship, and I will strive to live up to her example.##imported-begin##Kate Hollinger Yurick##imported-end##

July 02, 2008 at 06:55 PM



“ George & Family,

May it comfort you to know others are thinking of you at this difficult time.

Sincerely,

Bet Williams##imported-begin##Bet Williams, CEET##imported-end##

July 02, 2008 at 02:02 PM



“ I and my entire family send our sympathy and prayers to everyone sad and hurting from the loss of the most marvelous Marilyn Woolkalis.

I met Marilyn shortly after she came to Thomas Jefferson U. (TJU) from Penn. We hit it off immediately because we had the same interest in vascular biology...especially endothelial cells. I had the great pleasure to share space in Marilyn's lab and we were both mentored by Marlys Gee until she retired. Marilyn was a wonderful role model because of her dedication to science and education evidenced as well as to her daughter and husband. We shared stories of the daily challenges dealing with unruly or sick children and uncooperative experiments. We co-authored a few papers while I was a visiting fellow in the Dept. of Physiology and I am grateful for her fastidious scientific principles that stressed fearless self-criticism and quality control. She was a stern, but fair task-mistress; demanding nothing but the best work from her students and technicians. I especially had fun with Tom, Jen, John, and Kate in Marilyn's lab.

As a colleague, Marilyn and I made some road trips to meetings in Boston and shared a hotel room. I would do the driving and appreciated Marilyn's comments on the beauty of autumn leaf colors and inconsiderate drivers in their," Jelly Bean Mercedes". A special pleasure was pulling up to a rest stop off of the Mass. turnpike to collect Marilyn's mother, Mary Lou or "Sarge" as Marilyn affectionately nicknamed her for the trip back to PA. Mary Lou did a great job in passing on her authoritative no-nonsense nature to her wonderful daughter.

As a friend, Marilyn shared the awful experience of having to watch her father suffer through the pain of his fatal prostate cancer with a stoicism that reflected the thick skin she developed from being a woman in science. She was physically attractive and refused to deign to the inconveniences of makeup, uncomfortable shoes, or ironing ("If it's wrinkled, then that's how I will wear it!" she would say

in distain). Marilyn would submit to an occasional perm to help manage her mane. Our friendship was extended by visits to each others homes for special occasion. She and Julia came to my youngest sister's baby shower in my backyard. My family had the pleasure of being hosted by Marilyn and George for holiday parties and picnics. I identified with and was inspired by Marilyn's gardening prowess. I still remember the poinsettias in the Gerton/Woolkalis garden.

I spoke with Marilyn on the telephone shortly before she stopped coming to Jefferson and was uplifted by her positive spirit and scientific curiosity about her own disease. I hope Marilyn had in her heart at Julia's high school graduation. I had the pleasure seeing what a smart, beautiful young woman Julia became when she worked in Marilyn's lab.

Anyone I encounter while reflecting on the life of my mentor, colleague, and friend, Marilyn Woolkalis agree that only the good die young. I will miss her immensely.##imported-begin##Valerie Armstead##imported-end##

July 01, 2008 at 02:31 PM



“ Dear George, Julia and Mary Lou:

I was fortunate enough to work with Marilyn when we were both at the University of Pennsylvania. She was a critical scientist and a very caring person. I will remember her laugh, her fantastic sense of humor and her upbeat and can do attitude. All of you and in our thoughts and prayers during this very difficult time.

With sincerest sympathy.

Greg Kopf and Susan Weimer-Kopf##imported-begin##Greg Kopf##imported-end##

July 01, 2008 at 10:09 AM



“ Dear George,
I am really sorry I will miss Marilyn's Memorial Service. I am out of the country until this coming weekend. I share with you the feelings of incredible loss and sadness. She fought hard this terrible disease, but now she is in peace. I really hope that her pain was minimal. My thoughts and prayers are with you and your daughter.

Sincerely,
Christos###imported-begin##Christos Coutifaris##imported-end##

July 01, 2008 at 09:21 AM



“ George, I am not sure a broken heart ever mends but I hope the love and support of family and friends makes it just a little easier.
Valerie Baldwin###imported-begin##Valerie Baldwin ##imported-end##

July 01, 2008 at 08:41 AM



“ Tomorrow is the memorial service and will be a day of joy and sadness. Marilyn did a hard battle and thanks to you, caregivers, she must've had the best.
We will especially be thinking of you, George and Julia, as you find the new path in each of your lives.
With our sympathy and love,
Jerry and Karel Hedrick###imported-begin##Jerry and Karel Hedrick##imported-end##

July 01, 2008 at 12:41 AM



“ *My dearest friend Marilyn,*

You have been my special, best friend ever since we met at UC Davis in 1976. You were the first graduate student that I met when I arrived at the campus. I still remember your delightful smile and wonderful welcome when we first met. Since then, for many years as graduate students in the same laboratory, we shared many unforgettable moments together, frustrating as well as exciting. How could I forget those laboratory experiments that we went through together during the hours between the classes, nights, and weekends, and over the holidays? You were so dedicated in your work, which I always envied and tried to adapt. You also enlightened me outside the lab with much fun and guided me how to enjoy the life beyond the tight academic confinements. I still remember and can hear your giggling and teasing laughs that made my school life much easier.

You have always been with me and will forever be in a special place in my heart. I will miss you terribly, especially your January Christmas cards.

Love you much,

Sookie##imported-begin##Sookie S. Bang##imported-end##

June 30, 2008 at 02:05 PM



“Marilyn, Marilyn. You are gone from our sight only, but not from our hearts. It has been too difficult for me to get to a place where I can say my final farewell, my friend. Your friendship to me in sophomore year high school was so special, and we shared so many jolly good laughs (usually at my expense), right up to graduation day. Even though we had not much contact in the past years, knowing you were still alive and contributing to the world as a scientist, mother, wife and friend was comforting. You will forever be in my heart. Wherever your spirit is now, I am sure you are laughing, at peace and soaring with the eagles. I pray God's comfort and peace to George, Julia, Mary Lou, Dave and Barbie.##imported-begin##Jessica Wyllie MacMillan##imported-end##

June 29, 2008 at 05:50 PM



“My sincere symphaies to the Gerton family. Please know that your frends at CEET hold you in our prayers.##imported-begin##Trevor M Penning##imported-end##

June 29, 2008 at 02:36 PM



“My condolences to Marilyn's family. I was fortunate to know Marilyn as a colleague at Jefferson. She was the consummate teacher.##imported-begin##Jim Spath##imported-end##

June 29, 2008 at 02:31 PM



“ Marilyn was an amazing individual-brutally honest but caring, optimistic but a realist, tough as nails yet a softie on the inside.

She was a post-doc when I was a graduate student in Dave Manning's lab at Penn. She was lab mother, confidant, friend, mentor. Her laugh was infectious. How he put up with us raucus grad students I'll never know.

She loved children, and was so happy for us when our first child was born. She and George had not yet had children, but they so wanted a child. When I came back to visit the lab after I had graduated, Marilyn playfully whispered in my ear, "It's a girl!!" I had no clue what she was talking about, and only figured out later that she was telling me she was pregnant. This had to be such a high point in her life. Julia was on her way- Marilyn was a Mom.

We will all miss Marilyn. The world is a better place, and we are better people, for her having been here.##imported-begin##Ken Carlson##imported-end##

June 28, 2008 at 10:46 PM



“ I grew up with Marilyn in Falmouth, MA. Although I have not seen Marilyn in almost 40 years, I can still remember exactly what she looked like, her kind smile and generosity of spirit. When I just recently heard about her illness, I sent along our first grade class picture and asked her how many people she could identify. I hope the picture brought a smile to her face. My thoughts are prayers are with all of you and my best regards to Mrs. Woolkalis.##imported-begin##Sally Amend Larmon##imported-end##

June 28, 2008 at 10:15 AM



“ I was sad to hear of Marilyn’s untimely passing.

I will never forget about the first time Marilyn told me about her cancer. She told me how worried she was about adding stress to your life, because you would need to take care of everything, not only at your work, but also at home. Marilyn was a very independent person, and she fought tirelessly to keep her ability to function without assistance. She remained involved in her research even after her diagnosis and initial treatment, and I fondly remember visiting her in the lab and seeing her excitement after obtaining positive results.

Marilyn was a good friend and colleague. I enjoyed sharing my personal life as well as my scientific work with her. Her straightforward attitude and strong personality did not change after her diagnosis. As a matter of fact, she never wanted to be treated any differently, and she did not behave any differently, because of her disease. I remember questioning why bad things seem to happen only to good people and she laughed; she stated: “I can be mean, too”. Her sense of humor remained intact, throughout.

I am sure that her spirit is going to be with us until our souls join hers.##imported-begin##Hazem Hallak##imported-end##

June 26, 2008 at 09:00 AM



“ When I think of Marilyn I hear that unique giggle and laugh that put me at ease. Marilyn was always so clear, down to earth and fun to be around. I loved her homemade pizza.##imported-begin##Charles E. Gallagher##imported-end##

June 24, 2008 at 10:41 PM



“ My dear friend Marilyn, I will miss our Jefferson lunches, the laughter and discussions about EVERYTHING...about medicine and health care, about knitting and crocheting and especially about the "kids". You are close to my heart always, liz###imported-begin###liz muldawer-gallagher###imported-end##

June 24, 2008 at 10:14 AM



“ As a former graduate student at Jefferson, I remember Dr. Woolkalis as a pleasant and very approachable scientist. She will be missed.###imported-begin###Tapan Vyas-Kikani###imported-end##

June 23, 2008 at 02:05 PM



“ Marilyn was a valued friend and colleague in our laboratory at the University of California, Davis. Despite the thousands of miles that separated us over the last several decades, she was a faithful, though a trifle unpredictable, correspondent. She will be sorely missed.###imported-begin###Linda and Paul Baumann###imported-end##

June 23, 2008 at 12:16 PM