A tribute to a colleague and friend

Published: July 9, 2005

By JOHN DAY
Of the News-Register

As I write this on Thursday, Dr. Peter V. Hobbs is on the brink of death, having fought a gallant but losing struggle with pancreatic cancer.

I met Peter for the first time in the cloud physics laboratory of Dr. Basil John Mason at Imperial College, London, in early 1962. He was a struggling graduate student, depressed because his dissertation experiment wasn't producing results. I was there on an NSF post-doctorate fellowship from a small Northwest Oregon town that's home to Linfield College. I was 49. He was about 29, young enough to be my son.

Peter and I bonded immediately, and over the next year shared our trials and tribulations, joys and exhilarations of that workplace, and the many interactions we had with the dozen or so other members of the Mason group.

At the mandatory 10 a.m. tea time, all would troop downstairs to the dining room for a few moments of relaxation, tea and biscuits, vigorous conversation about whatever topic came up, all in the presence of B.J. Mason. This was the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis and I had the unenviable responsibility of defending the American political position before the skeptics.

The group had an attractive secretary named Sylvia. Peter fell in love with her and she with him and they announced their engagement in early 1963. I was invited to the traditional English bachelor's party, which consisted of visiting a number of local pubs for a pint or two or three. I went, but not being an imbiber, begged off at halftime to go home and be with my wife on her birthday. Peter and Sylvia have had a wonderful marriage that has produced three outstanding sons.

We suffered together through the rigors of the 1962-63 winter months, the coldest in the past 100 years, and experienced London's last great fog.

Mason went on from Imperial College to head Britain's Meteorological Office. In honor of his service to the advancement of science, he was knighted and is now Sir Basil John Mason. Mason had a rather imperious persona that rankled Peter. Interestingly enough, Mason, now 85 and retired, has been in frequent solicitous phone contact with Peter where they speak as equals in stature and longtime friends.

When I returned home, I became aware that there was an opening in the Department of Meteorology at the University of Washington. I made a strong recommendation to Peter that he pursue this opportunity even if it meant...
departing from his dear England. How much influence this urging wielded, I do not know, but Peter did accept the appointment and he and Sylvia moved to Seattle.

Under Peter’s leadership, he built the Department of Atmospheric Sciences into a world-class institution, producing a new generation of cloud physics researchers and teachers.

Peter has been a prolific writer. His meteorology textbook, co-written with John M. Wallace, sold 50,000 copies in the first edition and Peter was able to generate the will and energy to cooperate in the preparation of the second edition which will be completed this year. In recognition of the great support given by his department and the Institution, he is donating the royalties to a departmental scholarship fund.

In honor of his contributions to the knowledge base of atmospheric sciences, he was made an honorary member of the American Meteorological Society. He also recently won a $20,000 prize from the United Nations World Meteorological Organization for his group’s weather modification research over the decades.

He is in the Guinness Book of World Records for having observed and measured the largest raindrop (1 cm. in diameter)!

A distinguished career, indeed.

On trips to Orcas Island to visit daughter Janice, we stopped on two occasions to visit Peter and Sylvia in their lovely lakeside home in Bellevue, Wash. We even managed a game of golf on one of the visits, the only outing as it has turned out.

Peter will be sorely missed by his colleagues at the UW, both current and those widely dispersed. All have admired his great courage in continuing to come in to work as frequently as his energy allowed. Various members of his family have been able to visit in recent days to say "goodbye, with love."

Mary and I grieve his loss as we would one of our own family, but he was one of our family, if only "adopted."

So we say, "Godspeed, Peter, wherever the next stage of life takes you." It has been our privilege to be a part of your life.

*John Day is a retired Linfield College physics professor and an avid meteorologist.*