Towering scientist, challenging teacher, inspiring mentor

Honoring a fierce champion

Everyone who has worked closely with Philip W. Majerus, MD, professor emeritus of medicine in hematology, has stories. Students recall the hours he spent with them, doing experiments and going over data, and the many heated discussions in which Majerus challenged them to look critically at their research. Those trainees who proved their mettle gained his fiercest loyalty.

On Sept. 19, following announcement of Majerus’s retirement from research (he will continue to teach), more than 100 former trainees worldwide attended a symposium in his honor. A member of the National Academy of Sciences, Majerus is renowned in the scientific community for, among other things, discovering how aspirin prevents blood clots. This particular finding led to millions of people taking “baby aspirin” daily to prevent heart attacks.

Creating a Fellowship

Former trainees remember something else: a passionately dedicated teacher who inspired them to go beyond what they thought was possible. As a tribute, they have created the Philip W. Majerus Endowed Fellowship in Hematology.

“They say in academia that if you train one or more people to go on and do what you do, then you had an outstanding career,” said John D. York, PhD, the Natalie Overall Warren Professor and Chair of Biochemistry at Vanderbilt University. “Phil has trained 50 to 100 people who have gone on to become professors or physician-scientists who do what he does.”

“He really spent a remarkable amount of time with each person,” said Sandra Hofmann, MD,
PhD, professor of medicine at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. “He liked to sit down with students and look at the primary data in a great amount of detail. He had a really good instinct for uncovering where there might be holes in data.”

As Majerus explains: “To me, there are basically two kinds of laboratories. There is a results-getting laboratory, and there is a training laboratory, and they’re not the same.

“If you have a results lab, you get technicians to do all the background work, and the postdoc just does the critical experiments. In a training lab, the trainee has to start from scratch and do all the grunt work. In doing so, the trainee learns to function independently.”

“...if you did persuade him that you were right, he became your staunchest champion and would give you the credit.” — Joe Miletich, MD, PhD

Joe Miletich, MD, PhD, senior vice president of discovery research, preclinical sciences, and early development at Merck, remembers Majerus’s abrasive style as a rite of passage.

“He was really critical about what you presented as data or facts or conclusions,” Miletich said. “And he would push almost in an aggressive way sometimes. But, if you did persuade him that you were right, he became your staunchest champion and would give you the credit.”

To help students become more established, Majerus generously shared his network of contacts. “Phil was fiercely engaged in his trainees’ career development,” York said. “He really cared about the success of his people.”

Miletich, Hofmann and York said that training with Majerus transformed their careers. Today, they still use his rigorous approach.

A storied CAREER

Majerus earned a medical degree from Washington University in 1961 and completed post-graduate training at Massachusetts General Hospital and the National Heart Institute in Bethesda, Maryland. In 1966, he joined Washington University as an assistant professor of biochemistry. For most of his tenure, he has held leadership positions — serving as co-director of the Division of Hematology and Oncology from 1973 to 1994 and continuing as co-director of the Division of Hematology from 1994 to 2009.

Evan Sadler, MD, PhD, chief of the hematology division and professor of medicine in hematology, said an endowed fellowship supporting young scientists is a fitting tribute to Majerus. “That makes sense, given his long track record of training future scientists,” he said.

More than 34 former trainees contributed to the fellowship, which reached the endowment threshold of $100,000 in just one month and $300,000 by the symposium date, and it continues to grow.

This is the first named fellowship in hematology, signaling a new direction for Washington University at a time when fewer funds are available to train young scientists, said Victoria Fraser, MD, PhD, the Adolphus Busch Professor and chair of the Department of Medicine.

“Having institutionally based fellowships to support really promising young scientists is extraordinarily important,” she said.

For Miletich, honoring someone who influenced him so dramatically serves a dual purpose: showing appreciation and “reloading for the future.”

“There will be new kinds of Phils that come along,” he said. “You want to make sure there’s a steady supply of them. Because the world’s better off if there is.”