Obituary: Roger Alan Brumback, MD (1948-2013)

I sometimes hold it half a sin
To put in words, the grief I feel;
For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within.

Alfred Lord Tennyson
In Memoriam

Summarizing someone’s life work and achievements can be relatively straightforward, even for an individual as prolific as Roger Brumback. Placing their accomplishments into perspective and highlighting what is most meaningful among a lifetime of notable achievements are much more challenging tasks. Making sense of the terrible tragedy of 2 productive lives cut short, on the other hand, is impossible, particularly while sorting through one’s own grief. Yet in a few paragraphs we must attempt to do all of these things for our friend and colleague Roger Alan Brumback, who, along with his beloved wife Mary, was tragically killed in Omaha, Nebraska.

Roger Brumback (Figure 1) grew up in Monroeville, a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.1 Immediately after graduation from Monroeville’s Gateway High School in 1965, he enrolled in Pennsylvania State University. Through a combination of advance placement credits, a heavy course load, and year-round attendance, Roger earned a Bachelor of Science degree in premedical studies in only 2 years. It was at Penn State that Roger met Mary, his future wife. The University’s 1967 yearbook depicts a barely recognizable beardless young man with scalp hair, an appearance that was not destined to persist very long. In 1967, Roger entered the Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine in Hershey, Pennsylvania. His was the very first class of the newly opened medical school, and at age 19, Roger was by far the youngest member of this inaugural class. He initially intended to become a family physician, but a required medical school research project redirected his interests.1

Following medical school graduation in 1971, Dr Brumback began a 2-year stint as a pediatric resident at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. After completing general pediatrics in 1973, Roger and Mary moved to St Louis in order for him to begin training in pediatric neurology. While training in St Louis, Roger Brumback met several people who were influential in his professional development, including Philip R. Dodge, William Landau, Marvin Fishman, Warren Weinberg, and Joseph Volpe. Between 1975 and 1977, Dr Brumback served as a clinical associate in clinical and experimental neurology, neuropathology, and clinical neurophysiology with the National Institute of Neurological and Communicative Disorders and Stroke in Bethesda, Maryland. After brief work stopovers in Pittsburgh and Fargo, North Dakota, the Brumback family in 1982 moved to Rochester, New York, in order for Roger to begin pathology training at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry.

After completing his pathology residency and neuropathology fellowship in 1986, Brumback was recruited to the University of Oklahoma by his longtime friend and mentor Richard Leach. In 1997, he was named a David Ross Boyd Professor in honor of his teaching excellence. In Oklahoma, Roger established a clinical and research program in Alzheimer disease, and the Oklahoma Alzheimer’s Association created the Brumback Award to recognize individuals who made outstanding contributions to Alzheimer disease research. In 2001, Brumback was appointed Professor and Chair of the Department of Pathology at Creighton University School of Medicine, a post he held until 2010. He had recently announced his plans to...
retire from Creighton University in preparation for his and Mary’s move to West Virginia.

A scholar of the first order, Dr Brumback loved books—reading them, writing them, and collecting them. He once commented that he loved even the feel and sight of a book, and that a well-crafted book signified for him an author’s mastery of a topic in a way that shorter reviews could not. Counting multiple editions, Brumback himself wrote, edited, or coauthored at least 19 books on an amazingly wide range of topics. His first book was Practical Neurology for the Primary Care Physician in 1981. Color Atlas of Muscle Histochemistry and The Neuromuscular Junction both appeared in 1984 during his pathology training, and The Cerebrospinal Fluid was published in 1989. Another pathology text, Neuropathology and Basic Neuroscience, appeared in 1995. Despite having veered into neuropsychiatry, Dr Brumback continued to write clinical neurology texts, including Hydrocephalus: Current Clinical Concepts (1991), 2 editions of Neurology and Clinical Neuroscience (1993 and 1996), and 3 editions of Handbook of Symptom-Oriented Neurology (1989, 1994, and 2002), and Advanced Therapy in Epilepsy (2009). Most remarkable of all, for a neuropathologist, was a series of books and articles on psychiatry and developmental cognitive disorders, including Textbook of Pediatric Neuropsychiatry (1998), Pediatric Neuropsychiatry (2006), and Attention, Behavior, and Learning Problems in Children: Protocols for Diagnosis and Treatment (2001). And 2 books about Alzheimer disease by a neuropathologist may not seem unusual at first glance, until one notices that both books are written as guides for families and caregivers.

People have marveled that a neuropathologist could make substantial contributions to our understanding of behavioral neurology and childhood learning disabilities. This long-standing interest was largely stimulated by the collaboration with Warren Weinberg that began in St Louis and continued until Dr Weinberg’s death in 2002. Together they published numerous papers on childhood depression, mania, learning disabilities, and vigilance. Dr Brumback also contributed many other articles, book chapters, and editorials on a wide range of topics.

Roger Brumback founded the Journal of Child Neurology in 1986 and remained its editor-in-chief until his death. Remarkably, discussions about developing the new journal began in 1982, the same year that Brumback began his first year as a pathology resident. As a full-time resident, his planning for the new journal occurred primarily during the evening hours and weekends, often with the help of Mary Brumback. To fill the new quarterly Journal of Child Neurology, Dr Brumback initially solicited manuscripts from friends and invited colleagues and mentors to join the new editorial board. The journal was immediately hit with controversy. Unbeknown to Dr Brumback, Pediatric Neurology was being planned at the time, and several senior members of the profession testily suggested that he abandon his carefully laid plans to edit a journal. Nevertheless, Journal of Child Neurology grew steadily and eventually became a highly regarded monthly journal. Many individuals have served on the editorial board or as associate editors of Journal of Child Neurology over the years, including both of the authors.

Dr Brumback became the editor of Journal of Evidence-Based Complementary & Alternative Medicine (JEBCAM, formerly Complementary Health Practice Review) in 2010. This is an interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed, medical journal featuring hypothesis-driven and evidence-based articles pertaining to complementary, alternative, and integrative medicine. Brumback told one of the authors that the journal had not been successful and that the publisher asked him to salvage it. Editing a journal on complementary and alternative medicine seems like a radical departure for one so steeped in pathology and neurology, but he took on this new task with characteristic energy and enthusiasm.

Dr Brumback was an ardent supporter of other physicians and scientists and particularly the younger generation in our profession. The outpouring of anecdotes describing his kindness and encouragement of others on the Child Neurology Society List Serve is only a small indication of this aspect of his career. Dr Brumback, using his position as the editor of Journal of Child Neurology, agreed to publish the abstracts of the meetings of the Southern Pediatric Neurology Society and established the Journal of Child Neurology Excellence Prize given each year at the annual meeting of the organization to the best paper by a resident, student, or fellow. He also recently developed a resident and fellow section of the editorial board of the Journal of Child Neurology to encourage junior physician scientists to participate in the academic process, thereby learning at an earlier age to become thought leaders in pediatric neurology.

When Dr Brumback first mentioned that someone had named a species of owl monkey after him, it seemed like the start to one of his sly jokes. But, sure enough, he had studied the chromosomal structure of the owl monkey as a thesis project in medical school, determining via chromosomal analysis that there are several owl monkey species and proposing a reclassification. After Roger learned that one of the new owl monkey species had been named Aotus brumbacki, he declared himself a “born-again conservationist.”

A life of high achievement is usually peppered with accolades. Among other honors, Dr Brumback was elected to the Alpha Omega Alpha Medical Honor Society and the Creighton University chapter of the Gold Humanism Honor Society. He received the 2011 Warren Weinberg Award for Outstanding Contribution in the Field of Learning Disabilities from the Learning Disabilities Association of Texas. Dr Brumback was elected president of both the Society for Experimental Neuropathology and the Behavioral Neurology Society. Brumback was named the 2001 Alumni Fellow of the Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine, the highest honor given by the Pennsylvania State University Alumni Association.

No portrayal of Roger Brumback would be complete without a substantial comment about his beloved wife Mary (Figure 2). Born in 1947, Mary Helen Skinner met Roger Brumback at Pennsylvania State University. They married in 1969. Mary Brumback was an exceptionally bright, accomplished individual. She trained in pharmacy (University of Pittsburgh 1970).
She later completed law school (University of Oklahoma 1991) and practiced family law until the family moved to Omaha. After retiring from her law practice in 2001, Mary dedicated herself to volunteer work at Creighton University Hospital and with the Philanthropic Educational Organization (PEO). She was esteemed by her PEO sisters for her uncommon wisdom, love of justice, humility, and her compassion and generosity toward individuals in sickness or in need.

Mary Brumback was instrumental in the successful launch of the Journal of Child Neurology and many other projects. In 1989, Mary collaborated with Roger on the book The Dietary Fiber Weight Control Handbook. Their most successful collaboration, however, was in raising 3 well-adjusted and successful children, Darryl, Owen, and Audrey, a child neurologist. Mary Brumback often accompanied Roger to professional meetings, where she developed her own circle of friends, often organizing excursions to museums, historic sites, or other local attractions. She and Roger shared an interest in genealogy, and they were seasoned travelers who roamed the world together. Roger dedicated the second edition of Neurology and Clinical Neuroscience to Mary with the following poignant comment: “I dedicate this text to my wife Mary Helen Brumback, whose assistance has been vital in finalizing the volumes. This is another example of her unselfish devotion and support that has sustained me throughout my career.”

It is difficult to adequately describe an individual whose accomplishments were so numerous and so varied. Roger Brumback leaves a record of diverse contributions to neurology and pathology that few will equal. Roger himself would probably list the founding of the Journal of Child Neurology as his single proudest professional achievement. Others would mention his work on Alzheimer disease, his early studies on the owl monkey, and his work on childhood cognitive disorders. But what ultimately made Roger Brumback so special was not his many professional accomplishments but his unique personal qualities. He was brilliant and loved to learn new things. Roger’s enthusiasm for medicine and for publishing was boundless, no doubt contributing to his legendary productivity. But his close friends treasured his kindness and generosity toward others, his sense of humor, his modesty, his loyalty to friends, and his love of family. No one is likely to match Roger Brumback’s combination of intelligence, enthusiasm, work ethic, and personal warmth. We have lost a giant, and the void is cavernous.

References

E. Steve Roach, MD
Columbus, Ohio

John B. Bodensteiner, MD
Rochester, Minnesota

Note: The Brumback family has designated 3 organizations for anyone wishing to make a memorial contribution:

1. PEO, Mary Brumback’s service organization that supports women’s education:
   – peointernational.org
   – checks to “Cottey College” in memory of Mary Brumback; Institutional Advancement, Cottey College, 1000 West Austin, Nevada, MO 64772

2. Child Neurology Society
   – childneurologysociety.org/support-cns
   – checks to “Child Neurology Society,” 1000 W. County Road E #290, St. Paul, MN 55126

3. Penn State Hershey College of Medicine
   – giveto.pennstatehershey.org
   – (717) 531-8497. Please designate the Dr. Roger and Mary Brumback Alzheimer’s Disease Memorial Scholarship