

Remembering Professor Jerry Becker – A Tribute by Ngan Hoe LEE



Dr. Jerry P. Becker

March 1, 1937 - April 16, 2022

When I think of Jerry, I cannot but remember Isaac Newton's famous statement in his letter to Robert Hooke in 1675 – "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants". To me, Jerry is one of those Giants in the field of mathematics education. From his shoulders, I have seen further than I ever had before.

I came to know Jerry in August of 1998, when I was enrolled as a Master in Science for Education (MScEd) student, specializing in Curriculum and Instruction, at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC). Not only was he the instructor for four of the courses that I took under the MScEd program, he was also advisor for my study there.

As an academic, Jerry's passion and wealth of knowledge in mathematics education was, to say the least, infectious! It was such a privilege and joy to attend his lectures because he shared, often from his personal experiences and perspectives, about the various reform movements in mathematics education around the world. Through his perspectives, he provided me and the other graduate students with a holistic view that enabled us to develop insightfulness and multiple perspectives about mathematics education. He also invited us to examine relevant documents and led us to discuss and reflect critically on related issues. Given his status as an internationally renowned mathematics educator, his classes also presented many opportunities for us to interact with both American and international mathematics teachers because they were attended by postgraduate students from various parts of the world. The exchange and discussion that he orchestrated for us in his classes enabled us to develop a more grounded view towards mathematics education.

Jerry was also a very caring and nurturing advisor. I remember with great fondness how he delivered some pillows and blankets to my university housing when I first arrived at SIUC. He knew how ill-equipped international students were when they first arrived at Illinois, and he certainly left a deep impression on me about his hospitality. In fact, as I grew to know Jerry better, I realized that he actually kept a stock of all the important items that catered to the needs of newly-arrived international students on the campus. Before I left for home after completing

my studies, I felt honored to be able to contribute to his collection by leaving some of my stuff with him to benefit other newly-arrived students. As an educator, Jerry demonstrated what it meant to lead by example.

During the festive seasons, Jerry also opened up his home to us, the international students, for us to experience life and celebrations in America. Together with his wife, Tedda, he made us feel very much at home during our stay in Illinois. To many budding international mathematics researchers who went to learn from him, Jerry and Tedda played the fatherly and motherly figures whom we missed when we were far away from home.

Jerry's nurturing ways to the international students did not end with our studies at SIUC. He continued to actively maintain contact with us and, through his internationally-oriented listings, kept us all connected and updated about the latest in mathematics education. In fact, he was very much a mentor to me through all the years before his passing. I could always turn to him for direction and advice in mathematics education, and he never hesitated to respond with great enthusiasm and rich insights.

Jerry had a wealth of knowledge about mathematics and a deep familiarity with mathematics education in various Asian contexts. This, coupled with the fact that he often gave highly constructive and valuable advice to postgraduate students on their work, meant that Jerry received many invitations to be an examiner for PhD students here in Singapore. In fact, as he was such a well-known and respected figure the world over, it remains an honor for me, to this day, to be recognized at international meetings on mathematics education, as Jerry's student.

Jerry was always such a friend, mentor and leader in mathematics education that I will always feel proud to be associated with him, and to be known as one of his students, no matter where I go. I have also met others who feel the same way about him. Jerry is truly a giant in mathematics education and a beacon to many aspiring mathematics educators looking for guidance and support. Through his life and work, Jerry has made America, and particularly Illinois, a place where enthusiastic international mathematics education students continue to feel welcome and excited to visit. It is thus not surprising that Jerry received the 'Distinguished Life Achievement in Mathematics' Award from the Illinois Council of Teachers of Mathematics (ICTM) in 2021. The ICTM's recognition of Jerry's contributions brought pride to the SIUC community too, and he was featured as the "Longtime SIU mathematics educator honored for his contributions" in the SIUC news on 8 December 2021 (<https://news.siu.edu/2021/12/120821-Longtime-SIU-mathematics-educator-honored-for-his-contributions.php>).

When I first learnt of Jerry's passing, I literally felt the ground under me shifting – it was as if I felt the movement of the giant's shoulders that had supported me all those years. I once asked Jerry if he ever thought about retiring, and his reply, without any hesitation, was "I will continue to work in mathematics education as long as I can!". Jerry certainly did. Many of us who are on Jerry's Listserv, the international network for mathematics educators that Jerry set up and maintained over the years, will be able to trace back to the email that he sent out on 15 April 2022, a day before he left us. I am so glad that Prof Lin Cheng-Yao has taken on the task to continue with this great piece of work that Jerry had worked on.

Ngan Hoe LEE

Jerry has taught me much – to be passionate about what I do, generous to share my learning and, most importantly, kind to all my fellow human beings. I will be forever grateful to my Giant.

May you rest in eternal peace, Professor Jerry Becker.

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