History speaking

Reflections on graduate life — Dr. Vernon Ahmadjian, a long-time donor of ABLS, has now retired after a long successful career, and has trained about a hundred graduate students who are scattered around the world. One of these students, Roger Rosentreter, remembers his graduate experience with Dr. Ahmadjian and describes the experience with great admiration.

“Vee”, as he is known by friends, graduate students and co-workers, is recognized for his scientific work in the separation and recombination of the lichen’s major symbiotic components, algae and fungi. This symbiotic relationship amazes many biology students when they are first introduced to the concept, and the unique morphology that arises from the individual components continues to fascinate me and many others to this day.

So, why did I, a western “outdoorsy” type, choose to live on the “foreign” East Coast and study at a university in the industrial city of Worcester, Massachusetts? As an undergraduate at the University of Montana, I had attempted to write a term paper on the genetics of lichens for genetics class. Big mistake! Smart geneticists avoided the study of dual organisms such as lichens back in 1972. I don’t remember how the paper turned out, but it was during this process that I was first introduced to Vee Ahmadjian’s brilliant book, The Lichen Symbiosis. I became very excited about the lichen as an experimental unit and the functional relationship between the two organisms, still argued about by scientists today. I asked many questions about lichens, and when professors tactfully changed the subject to something they knew more about, it fueled my fire for knowledge of lichen biology. My handwritten letter to Dr. Vernon Ahmadjian was answered promptly.

So what did Dr. Ahmadjian teach me as he mentored me through graduate school? He was highly organized and held weekly meetings with me to discuss my progress. He was serious but friendly, and somewhat fatherly. He checked in on my academic and life “logistics”. Did I have somewhere to live, study, cook and exercise? Living in the city, I quickly learned that I couldn’t go hiking or kayaking after school or every weekend. I needed to make some lifestyle “adjustments”. Besides helping me learn laboratory techniques, Dr. Ahmadjian taught me to play racquetball. With a busy city schedule, this sport fit the bill. As a beginner, I ran around the court bouncing off the walls, as Vee repeatedly won the game with technique and control. He loved it.

Dr. Ahmadjian began each day on his typewriter, replying to correspondence. While methods of correspondence have changed since that time, the value and opportunities such relationships present are the same. He instilled in me the value of correspondence. He showed me the importance of membership in professional organizations, and building a personal reference library. Dr. Ahmadjian served on the board and was an editor for both the American Bryological and Lichenological Society (ABLS) and the International Association of Lichenologists (IAL).

Dr. Ahmadjian taught a local spring flora course, and I was fortunate to be his Teaching Assistant twice for this class. I love vascular plants and keying them out seemed so easy after the detail required for some lichen identification. For the spring flora class, Dr. Ahmadjian and I explored local natural areas prior to visiting the sites with undergraduate students. These weekly field explorations were so much fun! Dr. Ahmadjian would find the most interesting sites in between industrial parks or marked by “No Trespassing” signs. We discovered historic rock walls dripping with lichens hidden behind trees, rivers and creeks with narrow canyons, and rock walls covered with dinner plate sized rock tripe, Umbilicaria mammulata.

During our weekly meetings, Dr. Ahmadjian would often look up his own paper or book before answering a lichen related question. Every time, his comment was “one reason I publish is so that it is organized and easy to look up!” This always impressed upon me how important it is to stay organized, and it has greatly helped me both academically and in my day-to-day activities. Dr. Ahmadjian was always positive in his mentoring and to this day supports students and appears to be more concerned about others than about himself.

Roger Rosentreter