John Edward Olney, Sr. (1947–2010)

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John Edward Olney, Sr. passed away on the evening of Monday, 11 January 2010, at his home in Gloucester, Virginia, after a year long, bravely fought battle with cancer. Through this ordeal, John maintained his gentle demeanor, generosity, sense of humor, and love of fishes—and his passion for teaching students about them. In a long and productive career, John was highly regarded for his contributions to zooplankton ecology, ichthyology, and fisheries science. He was especially known for his contributions on the early life history and evolution of fishes. John’s many special qualities made him a uniquely wonderful and unforgettable individual, who enriched the lives of all who knew him. John (Fig. 1) is survived by his wife, Lee Larkin, his son John Olney, Jr. and daughter Susan Olney, his brother Willard “Buddy” Olney and two sisters, Sylvia Kelley and Amelia Hellman, and one grandson, Andrew Blatnik.

John, the third of four siblings, was born to Willard and Ruth Olney in Newport News, Virginia on 6 April 1947. The Olneys had moved to Newport News from Alabama during the Great Depression, when Willard found work as a shipfitter for Newport News Shipbuilding. John’s mother worked in the administration of the Newport News school system. As a young boy (Fig. 2), John was curious—often mischievous—and it was at a young age that he developed his wonderful sense of humor. For example, when he was about eight years old, he and a friend “captured” his friend’s mother and tied her up in the attic of his friend’s house. After being held captive for some time, and being unsuccessful in her attempts to get them to release her, she was able to convince John and his friend to give her “one phone call,” which she used wisely, by calling John’s father to come set her free. John’s response: a hearty laugh, the same one enjoyed by those around him for the rest of his life. His brother and sisters recall several instances where John’s curiosity ended with destruction of personal property, usually theirs! At about the age of five, John was found with his baseball, the prized autograph had been washed off in the morning dew. Buddy also lost the boat that he had built the summer before college to the next morning, to his surprise, all of the vegetation had been stripped from the tank—eaten by his new ravenous and, as he learned, vegetarian fish. He took this blow to his aquarium in stride—everything became a learning experience. Some classmates remember John as having “radiated gentle humor, kindness and a strong sense of ethics,” recalling that he was one of the “good guys,” and a “super student with a great personality.” His kindness, though, was sometimes hidden by his playfulness and chiding, and no one, not even his sister Ame—16 years his junior—was spared. When he was a senior in high school, the Olney family hosted an exchange student from Egypt named Amr Arafa. John would crawl around on his hands and knees and pretend that he was a lion, roaring at Ame, which of course, caused her to cry. Amr would have to reassure her, saying “don’t cry, Ame, he’s just a friendly lion.”

After he graduated high school in 1965, John spent a year at Randolph-Macon College before he and his college “parted ways.” John then worked for a short time as a pipefitter’s helper in the Newport News shipyards before he enrolled in the College of William & Mary, from which he graduated with his Bachelors of Science degree in 1971 (his son, John Jr., remarked, “I forget which aircraft carrier he said had the better pipes for sleeping on . . . I think it was the JFK”). The following year, he taught biology at York High School in Yorktown, Virginia.

John was employed at VIMS as an Assistant Marine Scientist in the Department of Biological Sciences in 1972 and began his master’s degree program under the guidance of George C. Grant in 1974. At this time, John worked on a NSF Research Applied to National Needs (RANN) project headed by Grant concerning distribution of zooplankton in the Chesapeake Bay. His M.S. research focused on the species composition, seasonal abundance, and spatial distribution of ichthyoplankton in the Lower Chesapeake Bay (Olney, 1978). At his master’s defense, Grant gave a humorous introduction, describing John’s “appearance” at VIMS and the development of his thesis topic; this introduction is included in the bound copies of his thesis and was highly regarded and greatly enjoyed by John. “He kept overhearing the word ‘thesis’ being used by other graduate students,” Grant wrote, “and finally came to my office to ‘spain’ it to him. Using familiar terms and fish eggs as an example, I told him that a student looks at the eggs through a microscope for awhile, sits back and ‘thinks on it’ for an even longer time, then writes about it . . . John started looking at fish eggs from our two

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