Basil George Nafpaktitis (1929–2015)

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On 24 May 2015, BASIL GEORGE NAFPAKTITIS, Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences at the University of Southern California and at the University of Crete, passed away in Charlottesville, Virginia, following a long but valiant struggle with Parkinson’s disease. Basil had been a faculty member at USC in Los Angeles for 28 years, serving as Assistant Professor from 1967–1971, Associate Professor from 1971–1979, and Full Professor from 1979 until his retirement in 1995. He also held a joint appointment at the University of Crete from 1982–1995. He was 85 (Fig. 1).

Basil was born on 23 December 1929 in Athens, Greece, to George and Margarita Nafpaktitis. His father was an accountant with the Shell Oil Company who spoke several languages, and he ensured that Basil and his older brother, Nicholas, were tutored in English from an early age. They also learned to speak Russian from their Ukrainian-born mother and grandmother, who lived with the family. George Nafpaktitis died just before the beginning of World War II, leaving his wife and young sons without a steady source of income and forcing them to face the hardships of the Nazi occupation of Athens on their own.

When Basil was old enough, he took on a number of odd jobs to support his family, including traveling around Greece and showing promotional films for the American State Department, manufacturing ammunition for NATO (during which time he lost part of two fingers in a lab accident), serving as foreman of a zinc mine on the island of Thassos, and managing a warehouse in the port of Piraeus. But one day his brother told him about an advertisement he had seen offering scholarships to the American University of Beirut, pending the successful completion of an entrance exam. Easily passing the initial requirements, he went on to earn Bachelor of Science (1962) and Master of Science (1963) degrees at the American University, the latter earned under the mentorship of entomologist Robert E. Lewis, then curator of the Museum of Natural History at the American University. It was here in Lebanon, in a physiology class, that he met his wife to be, Mary Kathryn Wieand—married on 25 October 1964, they recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.

In 1963, Basil was accepted to the doctoral program in Biology at Harvard University. Strongly influenced by his major professor, Giles W. Mead, he became interested in deep-sea fishes and quickly immersed himself in the systematics, distribution, ecology, and functional morphology of lanternfishes (family Myctophidae). Over the course of his years of active research, he described or co-described 24 new lanternfish taxa, many of which he named in recognition of those he highly respected and who were most helpful to him in fostering his career—among the notables are Erik Bertelsen, Rolf L. Bolin, Anton F. Bruun, Leslie W. Knapp, Giles W. Mead, Jørgen G. Nielsen, Richard B. Roe, and Robert L. Wisner. Known for his meticulous attention to detail and never publishing until he was certain of the results, he was also a highly talented artist—an accomplished “stippler” who illustrated most of his own publications as well as those of colleagues during his graduate student days to supplement his meager stipend. He was also known to come up occasionally with humorous yet thought-provoking cartoons like the one reproduced here (Fig. 2).

In 1966, while still a doctoral candidate at Harvard, Basil was offered and accepted a joint appointment in the Department of Biological Sciences and the Allan Hancock Foundation at the University of Southern California, in Los Angeles. Here at USC, he quickly made his mark as a great

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