Jack Saiki’s Memorial

(Bill Buss, PhD)

Julie, Beth, Cathy, Bill, Everyone, and in memory of Jack, thank you for the privilege and honor to say a few words about the personal impact of Jack’s friendship.

I first met Jack 40 yrs ago, in a class in NM Geology given by Jon Callender in the Geology Department on the South Campus. When Jack learned I was from the North Campus, he introduced himself and then confided something alarming – I was not to tell anyone else, but he was taking the class for a second time, because the final was so difficult, he couldn’t pass the course!

There was no final, of course, other than a party at the instructor’s house, but Jack never tired of reminding me of the look on my face when he told me about that fictitious exam!

That incident, I think, well demonstrates 2 aspects of Jack’s character – an abiding interest in the natural world, animate and inanimate, and a wonderfully playful sense of humor. In fact, Jack really was a master at pulling your leg – he could say the most outrageous things with such a serious manner, that I, for one, never failed to be taken in by his verbal pranks! I’ll miss that game.

I still have rocks on my mantle that Jack and I puzzled over in the following years; we enjoyed the thought of how they were made, what the world was like when they were formed, how we came to cross their paths, and in rare instances, who might have handled them. Sometimes we got no further than whether they were likely igneous or sedimentary, but we still enjoyed thinking about it.

For example, I have one here that we talked about, obsidian, a volcanic glass from a Mt. Taylor volcanic flow 3 million years ago. It’s chipped on the edges,
maybe worked by human hands, perhaps valuable at one time in a utilitarian sense as spearpoint or a tool for scraping hides. There are many sources of obsidian in NM and some are right in the neighborhood; Obsidian Ridge in the Jemez Mts is a good source, and this rock from Horace Mesa, SE of Grants, was also a preferred source for local Pueblo Indians. Jack and I often enjoyed sharing thoughts like these. So Jack will always inhabit the landscape for me in a very personal sense.

My friendship with Jack blossomed further as we became co-tutors teaching medical students in the Genetics and Neoplasia block. Over the course of the last two decades, I enjoyed and marveled at the knowledge and insights Jack shared with our students, of which I was certainly one. In Jack’s words, ‘every class we had was the best he’d ever seen!’ I believe the encouragement he extended to the students and his patients brought out the best in them. Jack’s guidance gave them the strength to face their most difficult studies, or their most difficult diagnosis.

Jack was not only able to impart the essentials of human biology, but a remarkable empathy for others. He was vocal in inspiring the students to think of the patient not as a disease entity or a diagnosis, but as a human being with hopes, plans, aspirations for the future that commanded respect and understanding. He encouraged patients and family members to speak their worst fears to each other in emotional honesty and release. It was his unassuming, gentle, unflagging concern for others, that was so characteristic of Jack and made him so special to us all.

I always thought of Jack as timeless, his equanimity made him seem impervious to the worries and ills that strike the rest of us. I thought that Jack would always be here, to pull our legs, to calm our worries, to show us the mystery and beauty of the transient world that is our life.
But look around us today; all those here, those in person, those in spirit. Imagine the thousands of students, colleagues, patients, friends, acquaintances, that Jack’s life touched by his wisdom and example. As long as any one of them, any of us, remain alive, Jack is still here, urging us to the better parts of ourselves.

Thank you.