Merritt Richard Nelson, 1932 to 2001

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Dr. Merritt Richard Nelson, professor, Department of Plant Pathology, University of Arizona 1968, passed away 21 January 2001 after a short battle with acute myeloid leukemia. Merritt was born 11 October 1932 in Tisch Mills, Wisconsin, the second son of John and Zella Nelson. The family moved to Norwalk, California in 1936 where Merritt and his older brother Paul Nelson spent their adolescent lives. In 1951, Merritt enrolled in the University of California-Berkeley, where his brother Paul was enrolled as a graduate student in plant pathology. During his undergraduate studies, Merritt interacted with Paul (whom he referred to as "big brother") and his peers and was influenced to follow his brother's decision to pursue a career in plant pathology. After receiving his B.S. in plant pathology from the University of California-Berkeley in 1955, Merritt enrolled in the Department of Plant Pathology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he obtained his Ph.D. degree in 1958 with Glenn S. Pound as his mentor.

Merritt dedicated 42 years of service to the University of Arizona as a teacher, researcher, and administrator. He spent 4 years as an assistant professor at the Yuma Research Station before moving with his family to Tucson in 1962. He was promoted to the rank of professor in 1967. He became the Head of the Department of Plant Pathology in 1976 and served in that capacity for 27 years until 1 January 2001, 3 weeks prior to his passing.

Merritt's research interests focused on diseases of cotton and vegetables, especially the epidemiology of viral infection. He was among a handful of scientists dedicated to understanding a virus attacking the majestic saguaro cactus. In his later years, he embarked on new challenges by pioneering local and regional analysis of plant disease epidemics with geographic information system and geostatistics. Results of these studies were recently featured in *Plant Disease* and elsewhere.

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In addition to his teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities at the University of Arizona, Merritt worked part time at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In 1979, he represented CSRS at meetings, conducted departmental reviews, and participated in budget building processes. During 1980 to 1991, he served as a CSRS representative on biocontrol technical committees, organized departmental reviews, and participated as a USDA representative on activities related to biotechnology, crop loss, and integrated pest management. At the USDA, he worked closely with the late John Fulkerson, a well-known advocate for plant pathology. As a plant disease management consultant, Merritt traveled to Guatemala, Mexico, Pakistan, British Colombia, Australia, and United Arab Emirates and different regions of this country.

Formally, Merritt was major professor to 22 M.S. and Ph.D. students; but he was a mentor and a role model to hundreds who passed through the plant pathology department as undergraduates, graduate students, postdoctoral associates, and faculty. He leaves an enduring legacy of kindness, integrity, and gentle strength. He was a big man with an even bigger heart. Merritt was truly and genuinely a "people person." In his interactions with people, he never failed to make them feel warmly welcomed – "you made me feel welcome in a world where I'd never known what 'welcome' felt like, and you did it just by being yourself" a colleague observed. "Bottom line: you gave me wings to fly," wrote another admiring colleague, and finally, "Merritt was one of the most noble souls I have had the good fortune to encounter," a testimony of a colleague. The sadness and the sense of loss felt in the Department of Plant Pathology at the University of Arizona for months after his untimely death provided evidence that everybody shared these tender testimonials. The attitude of some people toward work would become more positive if more and more administrators could emulate Merritt by placing a human face on their plans and objectives.

As a couple, Merritt and Nancy were a role model for many of those who had the good fortune to interact with them. Their love for each other and for their children and their integrity was exemplary. Merritt was a great husband, a loving father and grandfather, a kind brother, and a caring son for his mother who lived in Tucson the latter part of her life. Merritt visited his mother every day in the nursing home. Writing about Merritt and his brother Paul, a relative observed, "Paul and Merritt lived by the same moral and ethical standards of honesty, integrity, fairness, determination, devotion to family, loyalty to our country, and reverence of God." He treated faculty, staff, and students of his department as members of his extended family. He never missed an opportunity to interact with them, inquiring about their lives and those of their families and attending social functions and departmental picnics. Dr. Merritt Nelson is survived by Nancy, his wife of 45 years, daughters Terry and Susan, son Merritt "Skip" Nelson, Jr., and grandchildren Calley and Kevin Steel.

In honor of Dr. Nelson, a memorial service was held 26 January 2001 in Tucson and a celebration of his life was held 17 February on the campus of the University of Arizona where friends, colleagues, and associates, including his first Ph.D. student, Gene Milbrath and others from far away places attended. This celebration served not only as a means for Merritt's admirers to remember his services to humanity and to science but also as the official inauguration of an endowment to fund the Merritt R. Nelson Graduate Fellowship in Plant Pathology. Those wishing to contribute to this endowment can send their contribution to the Department of Plant Pathology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721, payable to the UAF/Merritt R. Nelson Fund.