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Smith salutes Piotr Decowski, late physics professor's genius for teaching

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NORTHAMPTON — Patrick Decowski can remember being a toddler in the backseat of the car, and asking his father, Piotr, endless questions about nature, science and anything else that made him wonder.

“I was a very curious kid,” Patrick Decowski recalls.

His father's patience and willingness to answer all these questions became one of the reasons Decowski, 41, is a physicist.

These are the same qualities that physics students at Smith College would later say Piotr Decowski inspired them to take their lives in a similar direction. Decowski, a professor at Smith College since 1990, died in May at the age of 74 in Poland. He had been ill with lung cancer for around eight months, said his son, an associate professor of physics at the University of Amsterdam.

On Saturday, the college will honor Piotr Decowski's life and work at a memorial symposium, an all-day public event featuring speakers, alumni presentations and time to share memories among students and colleagues. Patrick Decowski is the event's opening speaker.

Smith College physics professor Nalini Easwar said the department had brainstormed ways to honor their late colleague and chose the symposium.

“He was a physicist and a teacher at heart,” said Easwar. “His legacy is all of his students who have studied over the years with him.”

Smith physics professor emerita Malgorzata Pfabé, a longtime friend of Piotr Decowski, will give a biographical talk Saturday.

Both natives of Poland, Pfabé had known Decowski since they were physics students at the University of Warsaw in the late 1950s.

“He was a wonderful man,” said Pfabé. “I could not imagine that one could have a friend for over 50 years.”

Early promise

Decowski was born in Lwow, Poland, now part of present-day Ukraine, in 1940. He won a Polish national prize in physics as a senior in high school and entered the University of Warsaw at the age of 16, according to Pfabé. He earned his master's degree there in 1961 and his Ph.D. in 1967.

When he married his wife, Ineke ter Meulen, in 1972, Pfabé was supposed to be the “best woman” at the wedding, but she broke her leg two days before. Pfabé describes this as “one of the great disappointments” she has had.

Before coming to the United States in 1990, Decowski had been a professor at the University of Warsaw for many years, and had also spent time at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, the Center of Nuclear Research in Germany and Michigan State University.

Decowski became professor emeritus at Smith in 2012. He loved Northampton, and the Valley became a second home to him, said his son. His other son, Olaf Decowski, 40, lives in the Netherlands and is a mechanical engineer working as a project manager at the elevator and escalator manufacturer KONE. He too, can remember asking questions from the back seat of the car.

“My dad was a great ambassador for science,” Olaf Decowski said in an email. “He was an encyclopedia you could turn to, whenever you needed questions to be answered.”

He also recalled going on camping trips with his father and looking for planets, constellations and satellites in the night sky.

“My dad also had a fascination with the beauty of nature surrounding him,” he wrote. “Not only the ‘biological’ nature, but also the bigger picture.”

Patrick Decowski describes his father as a “great outdoorsman.” His hobbies, he said, included skiing, biking, backpacking, kayaking and music.

“He was not one-sided,” said Patrick Decowski in a telephone interview from his office at the University of Amsterdam. “Many people think that physicists are nerds in a stereotypical way ... He was a very all-around person.”

Piotr Decowski died May 14, the day after a special celebration with his whole family at the Polish White House, where his wife, who was born in the Netherlands, was granted Polish citizenship from its president, Bronisław Komorowski.

“It was almost as if he had chosen that time” after just seeing all of his friends and family, Patrick Decowski said. “Given the circumstances, it was probably the best time to go.”

Lessons come alive

Doreen Weinberger, a Smith professor of physics since 1991, said her last interaction with Decowski was at his home in Northampton not long before he left for Poland. At the time, she was trying to help a student with a capstone project, but had some questions of her own. She brought them up to Decowski that day, and he was able to talk her through them.

She said she felt like it was the most fitting final interaction. Their offices at Smith had been next door to each other, and she had always treasured their talks about physics.

“He was an extremely gracious person. Always good humored, willing to help you in any possible way,” she said. “I know a number of his students would come in perhaps a little apprehensive about taking physics, and he just had that reputation of being able to make it come alive for them.”

Anna Boehle, who graduated from Smith College with a degree in physics in 2011, said she had been undecided about what she wanted to study. But after taking a class with Decowski in her first semester, she knew she wanted to major in physics.

“I think the main thing that I loved as a student was that I could always ask him questions,” said Boehle, 25, now a graduate student in astronomy at UCLA. “It’s hard to have the confidence to ask questions, so it really makes a huge difference when your professor is open to that.”

Mica Foster, who graduated from Smith in 2000, said that as a student of Decowski’s in the 1990s, she got the sense that as an educator, he was ahead of his time. He focused on hands-on activities instead of lectures, and on nice days, taught his classes outside.

Foster and Boehle are among the alumni returning to campus this weekend for the symposium. Foster, a helicopter pilot for the Navy stationed on Whidbey Island north of Seattle, said that when she told her father why she was taking a trip east this weekend, he immediately remembered Decowski.

"I think that's very telling," said Foster, 34. "The only thing my dad remembers about Smith was my wonderful physics professor."

The Piotr Decowski Memorial Symposium will run from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. More information and a full list of speakers and events can be found on the Smith College physics department website.

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