

Ronald B. Linsky 1934-2005

Special Issue



Ronald B. Linsky

Visionary. Optimist. Leader. Advocate. Those are just some of the words used by friends and colleagues to describe Ronald B. Linsky, Executive Director of the National Water Research Institute (NWRI). His life-long dedication to water and water research was respected by many throughout the field. It will be difficult, if not impossible, to find another person who was as passionate and enthusiastic as Ron about the world of water.

Ron passed away on August 14, 2005, of myelodysplastic syndrome, a bone marrow ailment, at the University of Southern California Norris Cancer Center. He was 71.

"This is a tragic loss not only to the water community, but to all those who knew and worked with Ron," stated NWRI co-founder, Mrs. Joan Irvine Smith. "He truly made a difference with his innovative ideas and boundless energy. His contribution to water research and reliability are immeasurable."

As the Executive Director of NWRI for the past 15 years, Ron was responsible for overseeing an institute dedicated to supporting cooperative research to create new sources of water and to protect freshwater and marine environments. Under his leadership, NWRI grew into the third largest water research institute in the United States.

"Ron was the most creative and innovative leader I have known in the water, science, technology, and health business," said Washington D.C.-based water and health consultant Joseph Cotruvo, Ph.D. "He could think across many disciplines and see relationships that others missed. He saw opportunities, took chances, and made decisions that made NWRI an organization with impacts far beyond its size. He made NWRI a step apart from its colleague organizations because he eliminated the 'box'

rather than just think outside of it."

Ron became Executive Director of NWRI in 1991, the same year that the institute was founded in Orange County, California, by a group of Southern California water agencies in partnership with the Joan Irvine Smith & Athalie R. Clarke Foundation. In fact, Ron was asked to apply for the directorship said William Mills, former General Manager of the Orange County Water District, who served on the recruitment committee to find NWRI an Executive Director at that time.

"Ron was the clear choice of the committee and of NWRI's governing board," Mills said. "He had a strong background in water and was well-known by many. He was also very energetic, and just bubbled over with enthusiasm to get the institute going."

According to Mills, NWRI struggled its first few years, but soon enough built an excellent reputation because of Ron's ability to work with others and leverage funds. In fact, Ron was able to double NWRI's research budget every year by requiring that matching funds be provided by joint-venture research partnerships. Through these partnerships, NWRI supported over 160 water-related projects, focusing on the areas of exploratory research, treatment and monitoring, water quality assessment, and knowledge management.

"Ron brought a lot of credibility to Orange County and its ability to do research," added Mills. "NWRI not only has a local flavor, but it has national and international prestige as well. That was a significant legacy, to build a credible research institute in Orange County where nothing had existed prior. To start one from scratch and build it to what it is today was a remarkable accomplishment."

One aspect of NWRI that Ron was always proud of was the fact that is an "institute without

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Ron Was Dedicated to Water Research

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walls,” a unique concept in the U.S. because, unlike most other research-oriented agencies, NWRI focuses on supporting research activities where the best and brightest researchers are found. In other words, NWRI does not conduct the research itself, but rather seeks out and funds those to conduct the research for it.



Ron at one of NWRI's Nominal Group Technique workshops.

“NWRI doesn't have a big, fancy building or hundreds of people on staff,” said John B. Withers, Chair of NWRI's Board of Directors. “It's located in a little corner of the Orange County Water District and only has four staff members, yet it's one of the most important water research institutes in the nation. The force behind NWRI isn't its look, but what it can do. Ron encouraged ideas and research. He'd even take on the wild ideas that no one else would try. He had an energy and optimism that was unique, and he looked at life in general in terms of what is possible as opposed to why it can't work. He'd find the talent and make things happen.”

One of Ron's earliest projects with NWRI included traveling to Oman on behalf of the U.S. State Department and Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Muscat, Oman, to help establish the Middle East Desalination Research Center (MEDRC) for the express purpose of furthering peace in the Middle East and North Africa through a cooperative effort in solving water problems.

Desalination expert David Furukawa, P.E., Ch.E., who traveled to Oman with Ron, recalled: “One of the charges was to put together a state-of-the-art report on water purification and desalination. Another charge was to hold a workshop to get input from all potential member nations. Representatives from all key nations were invited to the workshop — Palestine, Israel, all the Arab nations, plus North African nations. At our hotel in Oman, Ron and I had personal bodyguards 24-hours a day. There were snipers around the hotel, as well as metal detectors, armed guards, and food tasters to prevent poisonings. At one point, Ron — with his typical humor — asked me, ‘Is this supposed to keep us in or the bad guys out?’”



Ron with Clarke Prize Laureate and long-time RAB member, George Tchobanoglous.

According to Furukawa, MEDRC is still successfully funding multi-national research projects and is the only remaining active leg of the Multi-Lateral Peace Process.

Ron was very much the visionary when it came to supporting new technologies in the water arena. For instance, he “recognized early on the advantages that microfiltration could provide the drinking water industry, then took it to wastewater and reclamation,” said Samer Adham, Ph.D., of MWH. “He was one of the early adapters of a technology that would change the industry.”

Beginning in 1994, NWRI hosted a series of conferences that brought leaders of the industry together into one room to talk about microfiltration, a water treatment technology that has seen momentous growth and acceptance over the last 10 years.

“Ron was consistent, like a train,” said Adham, “and he kept on having conferences every 4 years to stay on top of the technology. Then a new development in the technology came up: membrane bioreactors. So Ron incorporated it into his research agenda. He knew it was a breakthrough technology that would enhance wastewater treatment and make reuse more safe and

efficient. He wanted membrane bioreactors to be highlighted in NWRI's fourth microfiltration conference, which will be held in March 2006.”

Another technology that Ron championed was riverbank filtration, a predominately European drinking water treatment process, by holding two international conferences to introduce riverbank filtration to the U.S., as well as co-editing a 364-page textbook — the first of its kind — on its state-of-the-art as practiced on two continents. Ron had also planned to introduce this low-cost technology to developing nations by holding an NWRI-sponsored conference in China in 2006.

“Ron was very supportive of implementing riverbank filtration in China, India, Korea, and many other populated countries where it is needed the most,” said riverbank filtration expert Chittaranjan Ray, Ph.D.,



Ron with NWRI co-founder, Mrs. Joan Irvine Smith.

of the University of Hawaii. “We will work hard to implement riverbank filtration in the developing world, and it will be considered Ron’s legacy.”

Perhaps the most important project that Ron worked on at NWRI was not about a technology, but rather was a message — one that, throughout the world, Ron was most often identified with. He was an advocate of the value of water. In his own words, he believed that: “We have to rethink the costs, price, and benefits of water. We have to throw into this an element called the value of water. We need to look at water as an asset that provides services to the people who consume the water. If we invest in the *true* value of water, we can maximize the use and value of our water assets.”

To Ron, the value of water wasn’t just in the cost of treating it. The value of water was in the ability to enjoy a day at the beach. It was in the ability to drought-proof a region.

Or it was the ability to purchase a product — like a newspaper or pair of jeans — that could not be manufactured without water.

“Ron was a crusader,” said Ron’s best friend, David Hsu, M.D. “He’d drive all over Southern California — or travel halfway across the world — to talk about the value

of water. I’d tell him that he’d talked about it hundreds of times already, but Ron would say, ‘Yes, but we still have to talk about it because it takes a long time to bring this into the mindset of not just the consumer, but also of the people in the industry. They all think about the science — the treatment of the water — but no one thinks about the value of the water.’”

Ron had planned on writing a book about the value of water. NWRI intends to take on this labor of love over the next year and publish it in his memory.

Undeniably, Ron’s enthusiasm for water and water-research was boundless. He was a pioneer in the water industry — a man with big ideas and the drive to pursue them. Many people will remember him for his role in advancing water science. What they might not know is that, behind the scenes, one of Ron’s greatest passions was education.

A former high school teacher, Ron believed that it is essential to support and encourage young people who are interested in water science. Whether that was through giving out awards at science fairs or in sending kids to Water Camp, Ron made sure that NWRI took an active role in educational outreach programs. He loved to invite secondary school students to dinner to meet experts in the water

industry at NWRI’s Research Advisory Board meetings. Whenever a young person called asking for an internship or scholarship to help attend a water festival, he immediately made arrangements to help them out. He was also proud of the fact that NWRI was supporting more and more graduate fellowships each year. In 2005, there were nine Fellows total.

Education was so important to him that his family has decided to establish a Ronald B. Linsky Fellowship in support of NWRI’s graduate fellowship program. The Joan Irvine Smith & Athalie R. Clarke

Foundation will also contribute to this special fellowship to memorialize Ron.

“This fellowship,” said NWRI Fellowship Committee member Gill Geesey, Ph.D., of Montana State University, “along with other student fellowships established through Ron’s leadership at NWRI, will ensure that his vision of the value of water will be

passed on to future generations of student scientists, engineers, and economists throughout the world.”

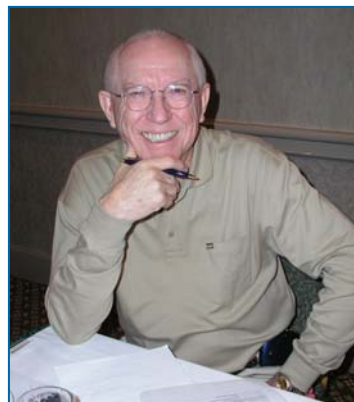
It’s almost impossible to describe how difficult Ron’s passing has been for NWRI. However, one of his favorite sayings was, “Go forth and do great things.” And that’s what NWRI intends to do.

Thank you, Ron, for everything — the time you spent with us, even when you were ill; your endless knowledge and encouragement; your enthusiasm; and, most especially, your kindness and thoughtfulness to all those around you. We will miss you so much!



Ron with his wife, Patricia Linsky.

In memory of Ron’s love of education, his family – with contributions from The Joan Irvine Smith & Athalie R. Clarke Foundation – will establish a fellowship in support of graduate students through NWRI’s fellowship program.



Remembering Ron Linsky

Editor's Note: NWRI received so many memories of Ron Linsky following his death that it was not possible to include them all in this newsletter. However, you may read all the memories at NWRI's website, www.NWRI-USA.org, by clicking on "In Memory of Ron Linsky."

Any memory of Ron comes back to his smile and the fun he had doing everything. The smile was the same from the first time I met him through the last time I talked to him.



Ron with late RAB member and desalination pioneer, Jack Jorgenson.

When Ron gave his favorite "value of water" talk at the 2004 Eastern Washington Water Summit, he upstaged the second day's keynote speaker, U.S. Senator Mike Crapo, by just being Ron. Weeks after the Summit, I ran into people who were still talking about Ron's enthusiasm and wit, as well as his message, and most didn't even remember Senator Crapo at all. But the

best part was at dinner the night before. I took Ron to Spokane Club, where he fell in love with the club's special potato dish and tried to talk one of the servers into moving to California to stem the tide of Californians moving to Washington. That was a twist I hadn't heard before. And I know Ron remembered the potatoes more than the conference.

Ron was a friend and mentor. I'm amazed at how often I think of little things he told me and how much fun we had every time we talked.

~ CRAIG RILEY

Washington State Department of Health



Ron had a special way of connecting with people, whether a Research Advisory Board member or the door attendant at the hotel. Effective leaders have this ability. I will always remember how Ron would greet me with that sparkle in his eye, that wonderful smile, and exuberance in his voice as he said, "Stanley! How are you?" In the course of the conversation, he would put his arm on my shoulder and say, "Let me tell about this idea I have and how we can work together." His passion was contagious. Ron truly cared about people and was an expert at developing collaborative relationships. I learned a lot from Ron over the years. A part of Ron will always be with me, and I hope to model some of the behaviors he lived by.

~ STAN PONCE

United States Geological Survey



One of my fondest memories is from a couple of years ago. I was having a miserable time that winter shaking a persistent cough. Ron came to see me

about something else and told me that he knew just what I needed to get better. He took me over to May Garden and bought me a bowl of soup that he said would help me heal. The warm soup, hot tea, and Ron's enthusiasm about whatever we needed to talk about (I can't remember the topic, just Ron's kindness) really did help me feel better. I don't know if the soup did the trick, but shortly after that event, I did kick the cough. I will always be grateful for Ron's thoughtfulness and friendship.

~ MIKE WEHNER

Orange County Water District



I remember the first time I met Ron, which was over a decade ago. It was at a horse ranch in Southern California, and we were having an NWRI meeting under a tent canopy. What a wonderful setting that was and what a terrific friendship was begun. Ron was, as usual, full of enthusiasm, bubbling over with ideas and seeking even more. What impressed me most — then and since — was his ability to cut through bureaucracy and get things done. This enabled him to make the great many contributions he did in the world of water. I miss Ron very much, but have confidence that the pathways he started will forge ahead and the quality of life of many people will be better for it. This, then, will be Ron's legacy.

~ GARY WESTERHOFF

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Ron's response to almost any idea was, "Let's do it . . . we'll have fun." Most opportunities for projects, partnerships, and conferences were met with this kind of exuberance. In Ron's view of NWRI, and probably of life in general, the purpose and joy lie in finding and doing things that will add to your store of knowledge and experiences. Learning things was fun, experiencing things was fun, going places was fun. "Let's do it . . . we'll have fun" — I can still hear his voice saying it, and I hope I always will.

~ BILL BLOMQUIST

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis



Ron will always be with us. I cannot and will not forget the twinkle in his eye, his mischievous smile, his sharp wit, his passion for life, and his tremendous intellect and insight — along with his many significant contributions to the National Water Research Institute, to the world's research community, and to our water environment.

~ DAVID YORK

Florida Department of Environmental Protection