
Reminiscences

Some reminiscences...

Tim Brown

I regard it an honour and privilege to be asked to share a few reminiscences on the occasion of David Penny's 70th Birthday. In doing so I'm doing better than he did with mine. I am here. The day after my birthday party, David called and simply said, 'It was yesterday, wasn't it?'

David does have a way with words. Recently I had surgery for an enlarged prostate – non-cancerous. David sent me a 'get well e-mail' and pointed out that I was an example of 'unintelligent design'. It really helped my recovery!

I came to Massey in 1965, and David and his family in 1966 or 1967. Those times were very different from now. Massey had got its charter in 1964 and the foundation Dean of Science, Professor Dick Batt, in that same year – I think. And at that time Massey was essentially 'Agriculture' plus supporting sciences. During the period of the mid-sixties there was a massive influx of returning Kiwis, often with 'foreign' partners, like David's wife Pauline, and immigrants like me. We were a mixed bunch, but with a few things in common – big mouths and all carrying the KATA gene. KATA stands for 'Know All The Answers'. Pretty well all of us had bright shiny new PhDs when they were very rare in New Zealand. David of course had one from Yale. We were both envied and resented.

It was such a different world. Pauline left her children with my wife while she worked. The people in my street used to refer to Pauline as 'your friend who works'. Now it is odd if the partners don't work.

You may find it hard to believe but it was David Penny who unwittingly introduced me to the 'do it yourself, kiwi style' and 'No 8 fencing wire'. I'm sure not many of you have seen David in this light. Coming from the USA, David and Pauline decided to fit central heating, a sure sign of decadence in New Zealand of the 1960s. David fitted the under-floor ducting, suspending it, I thought temporarily, with No 8 wire. It wasn't – and it's probably still there. He also punched some pretty impressive holes in the side of the house to gain internal access. I don't recall his ever filling them in either!

All the 1960s science staff at Massey were keen, if not to say fervent, on matters they held close to their heart. This included the Dean (he had two PhDs), who had very clear ideas as to where and how we should go. Mostly we supported the aims but not necessarily the methods. David was not always the 'pillar of society' you see before you tonight. For example, Dick Batt decided that, to keep a check on the then large first-year science classes, he would number the seats, and he expected the student to keep to a numbered seat – what a dream! Well David, and others, decided these numbers must go, and they either removed them or encouraged others to do so. The Dean was not pleased!!!!!!

Despite their differences, David Penny and Dick Batt were both keen to see the biological sciences modernised towards Cell Biology. No university in New Zealand was teaching it then. Dick Batt decreed it should be offered in 1967 under the headings of Cell Chemistry and Cell Physiology. For my sins I was put in charge of Cell Physiology, of which I knew very little. We were simply not ready. However I gathered around me David and Pauline, the Beardsellis, the Bacons, Janice Reeves and anybody who might have some biological or chemical knowledge – very much 'the halt and the lame'. It was tough, but with people like David, how could we fail? And fail we did not. I still have the first laboratory manual we wrote. We put on the first Cell Biology course at undergraduate level in New Zealand and it is still running. In 1969 on my Sabbatical to Cambridge I found our course was close to the Cambridge University course of which we had no previous knowledge. The political acumen of Dick Batt and the scientific excellence of David and his colleagues were a powerful combination. I don't think I ever learned so much science as I did at that time. David and Pauline were powerful scientific movers and always positive. They were hard-working good days always on the edge of disaster, which never quite struck. Thank you David!

Greer and I wish you a very happy birthday. May there be many more!

Emeritus Professor Tim Brown was a professor of microbiology at Massey University until he retired in 2000.

More recently he has been a science columnist with the *Manawatu Standard* newspaper, and in December 2008 published, with fellow columnist Associate Professor David Shillington, a book based on their columns.