*In Memoriam, John H. Nilson, PhD (July 12, 1950-September 26, 2023)*

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The research world has lost an innovator, mentor, advocate, and friend. John Helmer Nilson passed away on September 26th, 2023, after a tragic accident while on holiday in Sardinia, Italy. John was a lifelong reader, wordsmith, innovator, confidant, master of puns, lover of life, and most importantly, a generous and kind man.

***Academic Path:*** Born on July 12, 1950, in Mankato, Minnesota, John spent his formative years with his family in Albuquerque, New Mexico. After considering a major in Religion and being told that the “church wasn’t ready for him yet”, he ultimately earned his BS in Zoology from the University of Tulsa. He then completed his doctorate in Biology at the University of New Mexico working with Dr. Robert O. Kelley and a postdoctoral fellowship at Michigan State University with Dr. Fritz Rottman before launching his academic career at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine in 1980. John rapidly moved through the ranks of academia to become the John H. Hord Professor and Chair of Pharmacology and Director of the MD/PhD Program before being recruited to Washington State University in 2003 to serve as the Edward R. Meyer Distinguished Professor and Director of the School of Molecular Biosciences. He retired and moved back to his childhood homeland in Taos, New Mexico in 2016.

***Research Summary:*** John established himself as a trailblazer in the emerging field of molecular endocrinology and the transcriptional regulation of genes important for the control of reproduction. He was the first to clone the bovine prolactin gene and characterized its developmental expression pattern along with the growth hormone gene in bovine pituitaries. Over the years, he used state-of-the-art techniques to first clone then probe the transcriptional control of the gonadotropin genes. John was fearless in his approach and used all methods available to him. This included his work at the forefront of using transgenic technology to interrogate gene regulation when no cell lines were available to accomplish such a task. Indeed, his transgenic mouse models reinforced the intricate interplay between gonadotropins, sex steroid hormones, and the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonad axis. During his career, John published over 100 peer-reviewed papers in prestigious journals and book chapters with his numerous trainees.

***Service and Leadership:*** During his research career, John remained highly productive and was sought after by many for his “tough, but fair” approach. In 1998, he assumed the role of Editor-in-Chief of *Molecular Endocrinology*, where he transformed the journal into a working partnership between editors, reviewers, and readers to shepherd it into the digital age, paving the way for the companion Endocrine Society journals. Later, John was elected to the post of Vice President for Basic Science of the Endocrine Society from 2003-2005. For his many contributions to the Endocrine Society, John Nilson received the Sydney Ingbar Distinguished Service Award in 2011. His interests in the molecular basis of endocrinology also fostered his service to the Society for the Study of Reproduction. John served on numerous SSR committees, including Program, Bylaws, BoR Board of Reviewing Editors, Publications, Finance, and Development. His dedication continued as he served as a member of the Board of Directors, and ultimately, as SSR President (2008-2010, Elect – Past President).

***Teacher and Mentor:*** In the classroom, John strove to diminish the complexity of feedback loops in endocrinology by relating to the everyday experiences of students, including the use of a golf club to explain the hypophyseal portal system. As the leader of the Medical Scientist Training Program at Case Western Reserve University, he routinely developed extracurricular activities to break down barriers between students and faculty. While he made tremendous contributions to science in many ways, John will be most remembered for his exceptional mentorship and sponsorship of his own trainees and others who he met along the way. He had an uncanny knack for identifying people that “just needed a chance to prove themselves” and he gave them the platform to accomplish all that they could achieve. A look at the numbers from his own laboratory tells just part of the story: >30 graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, and physician scientists completed their training with him and were highly successful. His trainees include 19 professors, chairs, and vice presidents of universities; 4 founders, vice presidents, or directors of biotechnology/pharmaceutical companies; and 2 program leaders in government agencies. Over 50% of his trainees were women or URM. His reach also extended beyond his own laboratory to include many mentees from other departments and universities. He was always at the ready to listen and provide advice. John often said that “their success was his success” and he was fully committed to them. One of his former trainees stated a common refrain: “*I know that I would not be where I am today without John giving me the opportunity to work in his lab and his going to great lengths to make sure I had every opportunity to succeed*.” As a result of his unwavering dedication to fostering the growth and innovative thinking of his mentees, John will always be remembered as a person that above all, cared.

***Lover of Life:*** John, being ever cognizant of his role in developing scientists, embodied the advice of a colleague at Washington State University who introduced him to the concept of "embracing irrelevance" with retirement at the age of 65 to ensure room for new ideas and approaches by the next generation. He moved with his wife, Mary Hunzicker-Dunn, herself a leader in the field of ovarian biology and SSR Past President, to Taos, New Mexico to begin their new adventure. Here they lived their best life by fly fishing, golfing, and exploring the entire (and really, the entire) United States in their Airstream. While John Nilson will be greatly missed, his trainees have learned to “pay it forward” and will continue his legacy of leadership, joy at discovering the unknown, and support of those in need.

John is leaving behind his wife Mary of 16 years; his daughter Mary Kathleen, her husband Ira Whitten, and their three children Rylie Grace, Liam Quinn, and Finn Rory; his son Adam Thord Nilson; former wife and mother of his 2 children Sharon McNeil; his brother Tom Nilson; and his uncle Ron Nilson. John's daughter wrote that she witnessed her Dad sharing others’ sorrows and joys, elevating others, and being truly happy for them. He LIVED and appreciated every moment of his life. John often noted Henry David Thoreau's quote that most "..lead lives of quiet desperation" and therefore, he strived to find fulfillment in all he did. While John will always be remembered for his mentorship, his children and grandchildren cherish his sharing of stories, playfulness, music, pun-making and willingness to entertain and be fully engrossed in their interests and pursuits, while encouraging a lifetime of learning. John was a beloved father and grandfather, husband, and a friend to all who met him. The world has lost a very special man. There will be a celebration of John's life on July 12, 2024, in Taos, NM.