

Remembering Ron

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By now, orcharding and University communities all over the world have learned that we have all lost a rare and unique individual: Dr. Ron Prokopy. As Wes Autio put it so well in a recent email, “Ron’s boundless support of the apple industry will be sorely missed, and his extensive research contributions will never be forgotten.”

As Ron would have wanted, and in spite of the depth of our feelings of loss, I hope we can all focus on how he lived his life rather than on this untimely loss. I’m sure there will be a lot of sharing of stories at the memorial service planned for May 22 at his beloved farm in Conway. For those who can not attend, I’d like to offer just a few recollections about the 29 years I have known Ron.

The first time I ever met him, I knew right away that Ron was not your typical University faculty member. I don’t know if it was the longer than normal hair style, the South American knit bag that he always carried with him (and which inevitably contained bags of neatly sliced, home grown carrots), or his propensity to take his little “rests” (cat naps that he would always take while we were on route to some place or another).

When he first arrived at UMass Amherst in 1975, he was already well known in Entomology circles for his ground-breaking and innovative work developing effective, multi-colored, sticky sphere traps for monitoring fruit flies. The story goes that when another faculty member (Dr. John Stoffolano) was introducing Ron

to the clerical staff in Fernald Hall, he was obviously excited to have this new high-powered behavioral ecologist in the department. John, assuming perhaps that the clerical staff was familiar with Ron’s earlier research said: “This is Ron Prokopy, our new faculty Extension Entomologist. You know, he’s the guy with the red and yellow sticky balls!!” Once all present stopped laughing, John told

them what he really meant to say.

While working on a special research project on traps for the blueberry maggot fly with Ron, I continued to gain a better perspective on this unique guy. I learned that he was about the hardest working person I’d ever known. There was never a single field day that Ron wouldn’t be out there counting flies with me. When the data were finally analyzed, he was insistent that we write the results up for a paper to submit to an Ento-



mological journal. Those researchers who know him well are probably saying “What? Only one paper?” since Ron, in addition to arguably knowing more than anyone else in the world about the Family Tephritidae (fruit flies), was also incredibly productive in his publication record.

In spite of his brilliant intellect, Ron was very down to earth, very easy to talk with, and incredibly committed to extension work: once again not typical of University Faculty in general. He loved his days in the field. There was literally nothing he preferred more than sitting in the orchard observing his beloved insect subjects. Ron always joked that when he died, he wanted

to be reincarnated as an apple maggot fly. I hope for all our sakes that he does not get his wish, because I envision apple maggot becoming A LOT BIGGER problem if the species has Ron’s incredible knowledge and energies to draw upon.

Ron Prokopy was truly deserving of the ‘one-of-a-kind’ label. While it is comforting to know that Ron was following his passions right to the last, and that his passing was peaceful, the fruit industry, the science of Entomology, the University of Massachusetts, his many graduate students, and all his many friends and colleagues will miss him dearly.

