

Tributes from Mike's friends



I am speaking for many people who have known Mike as a friend and colleague through his professional life. A life that was rich in dedicated service to students, to colleagues, to institutions, to higher education and to health.

Unlike most people I know, he did not see a clear separation between a working relationship and friendship. When you worked with Mike you were also his friend and he made you feel very special and when you were that close you almost felt like family. His ability to form meaningful relationships and to nurture those special relationships was one of the secrets of his success as a human being.

For many years I thought Mike was a Glaswegian but he was actually born in Edinburgh and moved to Glasgow when he was a boy. He was educated at Kelvinside Academy, Glasgow. His scholastic achievements at Kelvinside were modest and his school reports contain phrases like bewildered and bemused" for French and "Airy fairy and lacks concentration" for English and words to the effect that 'this lad was going nowhere'. How wrong could they have been. But let's say at the time it wasn't clear where he was going.

In one of those cruel ironies that life throws at us, Mike was due to return to his old school as Guest of Honour at Kelvinside Academy's prize-giving this summer, and one of the messages he was going to give from his own personal experience, was that even if you are not particularly gifted at school, if you work hard, you can achieve much in life. I hope that message still goes out to the pupils of Kelvinside. They have in Mike a wonderful example of someone who aspired to great things and through hard work, perseverance and making the most of his talents he pushed himself to achieve what he believed in – which was fundamentally about making a positive difference to the world around him.

Mike did manage to achieve sufficiently high grades to attend Strathclyde University where he studied Biology. His love of research, which was to last the rest of his life, was fired by Professor Bill Hutchison, a parasitologist. Mike learnt the skills of electron microscopy and he worked at Strathclyde University and Glasgow Royal Infirmary as an electron microscopist after graduating in 1976.

In 1978, he moved south to take up an Agriculture Research Council fellowship at the Houghton Poultry Research Station in Cambridge, where he completed a PhD investigating the ultrastructure of coccidia which are commercially important chicken parasites. His supervisor at North East London Polytechnic was Professor Stan Ball, and Mike and Stan continued to collaborate and publish throughout Mike's working

career. Indeed, on the day Mike died, a letter from Stan, who is now in his 80's, arrived suggesting a further idea for research collaboration. This is another example of Mike's great ability to sustain his working relationships and friendships.

*I have many fond memories of Mike dating back more than 30 years to when we first met at North East London Poly as PhD students. Some of my earliest impressions were of his inordinate politeness and generosity. He would always be the first to buy a round of drinks. There were 4 other PhD students in the lab and soon after he started Mike invited us all over to his tiny rented bedsit in East London for a Burns Night supper of haggis, tatties and neaps. Unfortunately Mike was not a great cook, and the food was rather underdone, but this didn't matter as we all had a most enjoyable evening and the food was soon forgotten when we retreated to the local pub for a few drinks to wash it down. Mike remained a most loyal friend until his untimely death. **Alan Seddon***

In 1981 Mike started work as a post-doctoral research assistant at the Middlesex Hospital Medical School. Again using his electron microscopy skills, he was investigating the effect of smoking on arterial disease. But the most important thing that happened to Mike was the arrival in the path lab, of a young trainee doctor. Mike was smitten with this pretty, hard working, bright, plain spoken, but soft hearted young woman and the partnership that was Mike and Carol was born and they were married in 1987. Carol's recollection was that she did all the work while Mike and his team would sidle in some time after nine, put the kettle on and spend the first hour talking about what they were going to do. Mike loved to think about the future!

*I knew Mike from way back in the distant 1980s. He was in London doing a post doc with Neville Woolf at the Middlesex Hospital Medical School. I was the technician in the Electron Microscopy unit with him and Peter Rowles, Lucienne Papadaki and Dinesh Dasandi. (and later Alan Seddon). I remember him being full of fun. In the lab there was the usual banter, leg pulling and practical jokes. One of my more exacting tasks was cutting sections for the electron microscope. Mike would creep up and flick my ears when he knew I couldn't retaliate – I'd get him back later – one way was by nailing his locker shut. We used to go running together around Regents Park at lunch time in an effort to keep fit ameliorated by the occasional drinking session. He left to work at Kingston University and we lost touch. With the internet its so easy to look up your mates and see how theyre doing – which I did a couple of years ago - I was impressed with how Mike was getting on climbing up the academic tree. I always said one day I'll pick up the phone or email him and see how hes doing. Funny thing is he came into my thoughts at the end of February so I looked him up at the Robert Gordon to find he had passed. Tis a shame he had to go so early, he was one of the nicest people on the planet. **Chris Neal***

By now Mike of course had a string of papers and he was ready to take on his first 'proper' teaching job. In 1985 he was appointed lecturer in biomedical sciences at what was then Kingston Polytechnic.

I met Mike on my first day at the polytechnic when I discovered him living in splendid isolation writing scholarly papers in a portacabin in the back yard of the poly. So my cheery hello was not what he wanted to hear and it was only after about my fourth knock that he opened the door and reluctantly let me come into his office where I announced that he had to leave his retreat and move in with me. In fact I had already been to the office we had been allocated and given myself the best desk by the window with the telephone leaving Mike the dingy corner which he made even dingier by surrounding himself with a wall of filing cabinets. But he had the last laugh because those of you who know Mike know he is never far away from a telephone. So I became his receptionist fielding calls all day long. I remember how irritated I was by the constant stream of young, mostly attractive female students who were constantly queuing up for his attention and disappearing behind the filing cabinets.

I tell this story for two reasons. Mike's passion for keeping in touch with people over the phone and the deep care and attention he gave his students. As a teacher and tutor on the applied science course he was dedicated and committed, and well liked and respected by his students.

Mike's talents were spotted by the senior managers and in the space of 10 years he went from being humble lecturer through senior lecturer, course leader and Reader to Professor and Head of Life Sciences. It was here that he first demonstrated his flair for getting the best out of people.

*I have so much to thank Mike for. I first met him when he was a lecturer in the School of Life Sciences when working on a top up degree in Radiography. His patience encouragement and support were evident from the start, he would never dismiss anyone's comments and took on board tasks easily. He had a social charm that put people at ease, the common touch, but this was matched with a steel determination and focus to get the job done. His career soared from Head of School to Dean then onto Principal at RGU, but it was the same Mike I first met. **Nick Lock***

In 1995, Mike became Foundation Dean of the Faculty of Health and Social Care Sciences at Kingston University and St George's Medical School (University of London). This was a real challenge in bringing about significant organizational change across the different cultures of a new university, a traditional university and the NHS to establish a new and successful Faculty of Health and Social Care Sciences. This was where Mike honed his mediation and negotiating skills. He seemed to be able to get everyone talking even if they didn't initially agree, and then to see the wider picture and step away from parochial interests. The Faculty has been a great success and Mike was very pleased to attend its 10th birthday celebrations in 2005.

*I knew Mike as manager, colleague and friend. Since the sad news of his death it is become very evident to me the real impact that he has had on myself and I am sure all those that he came into contact with. With his extraordinary interpersonal skills and positive approach to everything he did, calmness under pressure and energy for work or recreational activities can only be admired (I recall an example of Mike's persuasive abilities also for a supposed 'short' jog around Grand Rapids, Michigan during an academic visit). From his time as a Head of School at Kingston and subsequently Dean at Kingston and St George's, Mike leaves me a legacy of a working style that I continue to strive to emulate and for which his presence will be ever felt. **Graham Morgan***

Mike was appointed pro vice-chancellor at the University of Hertfordshire in 2001, where his responsibilities included academic planning, quality assurance and learning and teaching, along with the establishment of a postgraduate medical school and a school of pharmacy.

By now Mike had established himself as a leader who could bring people together and create a sense of common purpose that enabled them to work collaboratively. In 2000 he was invited to Chair the QAA Subject Benchmarking Group for NHS funded health and social care subjects including Dietetics, Health Visiting, Midwifery, Nursing, Occupational Therapy, Orthoptics, Physiotherapy, Podiatry, Prosthetics and Orthotics, Radiography, Speech and Language Therapy. Under his chairmanship the group managed to create an overarching Statement of Common Purpose to be used by all benchmark statements in these subjects – quite an achievement.

At this time I was working at the Higher Education Academy and we wanted to introduce a new team-based process to help institutions plan difficult change. We needed some institutional leaders to help us and Mike kindly volunteered to come on a study visit to the USA. His support and advice were very helpful and we managed to persuade the HEA and Leadership Foundation Boards that it was worth doing. Mike was great company and it was a great team and we shared many incidents together. I remember the first Change Academy was held in Dalmahoy near Edinburgh and Mike had to introduce one of the guest speakers. He did a good job then promptly disappeared. But after about 20minutes, during a discussion point, the speaker came over to me and said he'd lost his notes. Well its hard to loose your notes on a lectern. I went to look for Mike and him and found him outside 'on the phone' to his secretary.. clutching a sheaf of papers that included the speakers notes! That was Mike, a humorous incident was never far from him and but he was always generous in accepting his part in the story. For me that was his most endearing quality. It was what made him Mike and it did not belittle the respect we had for him.

*Mike was such a loving gentle man. I really liked him as friend, man, colleague and saw him as a role model. I was looking forward to visiting him this spring when visiting Aberdeen. I hope he didn't suffer more then necessary and had a peaceful passing. I will miss him and light a candle in his memory. **Fred Buining** friend and colleague on the Change Academy Team*

Mike was proud of his Scottish heritage and he loved to celebrate and disseminate his culture. This photo was taken before his toast to the haggis at our first Change Academy in 2004.



For some time Mike had been working with the Prince's Foundation for Integrated Health, he was a critical friend to many of the complementary therapies, and he was keen to see them develop a research base to support their work. In 2003 he was asked to Chair a Department of Health Working Group on the regulation of Herbal medicine, and so began a process, which is still ongoing today.

Once again, Mike had to try to find and build consensus between the many different groups of practitioners of herbal medicine, and many of the tributes that have been paid to him, relate to his sense of fairness and good humour which often defused difficult discussions and allowed people to come together. Mike's over-riding concern was to protect the public from the potential dangers of herbal medicine, and recent publicity has confirmed that patients are still at risk. The Department of Health is still considering the responses to the consultation but it would be a fitting legacy for Mike if statutory regulation was to be implemented. Mike was awarded an MBE for his services to health in January of this year but sadly never got to attend the ceremony.

In 2005 Mike was appointed Vice-Chancellor of The Robert Gordon University. His pride in the achievements of the University was immense and he would tell everybody about RGU being ranked as the best modern University in the UK. He was proud of the strong tradition of educating students for the professional world and never stopped reminding me that his university had the best employability statistics of any university in the UK (marginally better than my own!). On a visit to the University in May 2008 Mike proudly showed me around the campus. It took a long time because every few minutes he would stop to talk to someone. Not a cursory hello but something personal, meaningful and friendly and you had the sense that that person went away happy because they had met him.

I had an epiphany moment while writing this. A group of students were visiting us from Finland and one of them said something that I felt fitted Mike's style of leadership very well. 'Leadership at its best when you are with friends, so if you can make your colleagues your friends you can be a more effective leader'. I think this is what Mike did all the time.

*I had the great privilege of knowing Mike when I worked as a Professor at RGU, and served as a staff representative on the institution's Board of Governors. He was a very inspirational leader, but also a modest person interested in all kinds of views and perspectives. He was also remarkably lacking in pomposity - not something one could say of all VCs. All his emails invariably ended 'Mike.' I recall visiting him in his office, to find him making coffee for his secretary, himself and me. This lack of pretence and care for others was quite typical. It shouldn't be remarkable, but of course it was. A one-off, a true gentleman and a very wise man. He will genuinely be much missed. **Dennis Tourish***

Mike was well liked by other senior managers outside the university. My own Vice-Chancellor Chris Snowden spoke very highly of him and these tributes from David Eastwood and Sally Brown again sum up Mike pretty well.

*We worked together on a number of bodies over the years, and Mike was always generous in his commitment, his views of others, and his willingness to let others take credit. His integrity was obvious and unforced, and his commitment to the institutions he served exemplary. A fine man, a fine leader, a fine legacy, and a great loss. **Professor David Eastwood Vice-Chancellor University of Birmingham***

*Mike treated staff and students with respect at all times and always offered help and support to everyone who needed it. He was a role model to me of what a senior manager could be like: a heroic figure who was never grandiose or self-important. I like others really miss him. **Sally Brown Pro-Vice Chancellor Leeds Metropolitan University***

Mike's illness was diagnosed in 2005 a few months after he was appointed as RGU Vice-Chancellor. He saw it as a great nuisance that interrupted his plans for the future, but his achievements are all the more remarkable considering his health. He was determined that life would go on and he would live it to the full. He dealt with his renal

cancer in the same way he dealt with everything else. He got on with it. He didn't make a fuss, he was always positive and optimistic and stoically underwent treatment after treatment. He kept his struggles private and never felt sorry for himself or sought sympathy, and never stopped working for what he believed in until the last few days of his life. As he said, he could no longer drive or walk far, but he could still talk and do something useful.... and being useful was what mattered to him.

He always took a strong interest in the work of my centre and he had been to several of our conferences. When I talked about our life-wide learning idea he could immediately see the value and he believed in the idea that you learnt useful things from every aspect of your life. He readily agreed to helping us and re-organised a meeting so that he could participate in the leaders panel and even offered to write a paper. Even though he was by now quite ill. Such was his commitment to trying to make a difference. So it is very fitting that we dedicate our conference to his memory and hope that we can stand on his shoulders and try to make a difference.

What comes through the tributes to Mike like a shining light is the wonderful consistency of a man who was warm and friendly, generous in every aspect of his life, a modest, humble down to earth human being. He was a man of conviction and great integrity. He was full of enthusiasm, passion and vitality, full of fun and humour. He loved and lived life to the full and dedicated his life to making a difference and helping others to make their difference.

He was a champion, an enabler, someone who helped others to do the things that they wanted and needed to do. Someone who was willing to set an example and to lead discussion. But also someone who listened and let himself be led by others. He was someone who got things done and made things happen.

Mikes great quality, as so many people who have paid tribute to him have said, was his ability to enable people to give of their best. In groping for something more meaningful to say, I am reminded of some words from 'Spoonface Steinberg' a wonderful play written for radio by Lee Hall. It's a story about a young girl who is dying of cancer and struggling to make sense of everything.

She reasoned that

When the world was made God made everything out of magic sparks
Everything there is, is made of magic sparks
And all the magic sparks went into things deep down
And everything has a spark
But it is quite a while ago since things were made
And now the sparks are deep down inside
And the whole point of being alive
The whole point of living is to find the spark
If you find the spark then it would be like electricity
And you would glow like a light
And you would shine like the sparks
And that was meaning of life
It wasn't like an answer or a number as such
It was finding the sparks inside you and setting them free

I think Mike was very good at finding his sparks and setting them free, and of sharing his sparks with others. But most of all his gift to all of us who knew and worked with him was to help us find our own sparks and encourage us to set them free.

Norman with help from some of Mike's friends

If you would like to add your own personal tribute please use the comments box or contact me Norman.Jackson@surrey.ac.uk