

A Rare Gift

Good Evening. I am Janna Scott, a former student of Dr. Ali, and I am pleased to take part in this celebration of my professor, my mentor, my friend. What a display of expertise we have witnessed these past two days. Dr. Umbach has indeed outdone himself as have all the contributors to this commemorative event. It was a resounding success. It has also been great to hear the stories and appreciation from everyone here. It validates what I am about to share. Dr. Ali is a well loved and respected professor and mentor whose actions speak louder than words, whose generosity, kindness, and integrity are exemplary, and whose humility commands the respect of all. With a drop of a pebble, the world is changed forever.

I came to Ball State in the fall of 1978. The first quarter of my sophomore year, I decided to change my major from pre-engineering to mathematics. Mathematics seemed to be the key to all other scientific disciplines. In my junior year, I had my eye on two courses: philosophy and probability. With a flip of a coin, my life changed ...a new path cleared.

Dr. Ali introduced me to probability and statistics that year as well as being my first professor of foreign origin. At first I found it difficult to understand his diction, but as time went on I heard his lessons with greater clarity. He taught lessons on statistics, but he also taught us example about character, culture, dedication and success. He encouraged us (the students) to study hard, show respect, and dress appropriately (he really hated the ratty jeans that was the style then. I can't imagine how he copes with the baggy pants in style today). He would often get frustrated with the lack of motivation and achievement the majority of the class (including me) exhibited. I wasn't the brightest student, but I had a good work ethic instilled in me, and I recognized the inspirational qualities of Dr. Ali. My father always told me to surround myself with those who inspire and growth is sure to follow. He was right. Dr. Ali cared so much and wanted his students to succeed. And to facilitate that he always ... ALWAYS ... had office hours for those who had questions. I gained a great deal from those office hours: a mentor, a guide, a fatherly figure, and a friend.

I enjoyed his course so much that I took more statistics courses. Dr. Ali encouraged me to change my major to mathematics with a statistics option.

After graduation, I was a stay at home mom for a year. I had two children, 4 and 6 months, when my marriage fell apart. After a daunting summer of unsuccessful job searching, I went back to my professor for advice ... wisdom ... options. He was very distraught about my situation. He fumbled with papers on his desk and pulled out a solution. Just like that! A graduate assistantship was available for the coming year. This was not just a job. This was an opportunity that changed my life ... saved my life. I was completely shocked. I had no expectation for solution, but here it was: a gift, a flicker of hope, a new beginning. The graduate assistantship not only paid me \$440/month, but it also paid for my graduate courses and student/family housing. I was shocked at this opportunity and was not expecting a solution, but he made it happen.

Why me? Who was I to receive such an outstanding prospect? This questioning was stifled by my elation for brighter horizons. I vowed then and there that I would work hard and pursue success, and maybe someday Dr. Ali would be proud of his decision. For my masters program, he encouraged me to maximize my exposure to computer science coursework. He also provided me networking opportunities by allowing me to help with the Midwest Bio-Pharmaceutical Statistics Workshop for two years. I met many statisticians in industry and witnessed their expertise. This provided me a target, a goal, an objective. I wanted to work in this industry.

My statistics skills were sound, and I had developed a broad knowledge of computer science. I really needed exposure to the statistical software packages used in industry in order to become marketable. Dr. Ali filled that gap as well. He designed an independent study course for his three graduate students. We compared output generated by BMDP, SPSS, and SAS utilizing the course work from our earlier studies which were calculated by hand. SAS came out the clear winner in all cases. BMDP and SPSS used approximations that hindered the accuracy of the results.

After graduation, I accepted a job at Burroughs Wellcome in Research Triangle Park, NC as an entry level statistician. That was 20 years ago. I am now an assistant director of Biostatistics and Programming Development Partners. Our group facilitates “sharpening the saw” including developing and embedding of best practices for all biostatisticians and statistical programmers in clinical development.

Dr. Ali,

I hope you are happy with your decision from long ago. I still cannot believe you would take such a chance on me, but I am very grateful that you did. I am very fortunate to have crossed paths with you. It has brought me growth and opportunity to excess. I cannot thank you enough for all you have done for me, but I can let you know that the giving has not stopped. Because of your selfless and empowering act of kindness, you have instilled in me the desire to do the same, and I do. Your ripple is still in movement.

Thank you!

Janna