

Remembering Dr. Walter H. Birkby

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I first met Dr. Walter H. Birkby in the fall of 1979 when I was an undergraduate anthropology major at ASU. My academic advisor had told me a bit about the field of forensic anthropology and I wanted to meet one of the very few practicing forensic anthropologists there were at the time to learn more about the field. Walt's passion for forensic anthropology was clear as he described to me a few scenarios outlining his involvement in medicolegal casework always being sure to highlight his pleasure at working with law enforcement officers. For me, being the son of a policeman, gaining more and more experience as a student of human anatomy, and enjoying puzzle solving, I was immediately hooked. In 1984 I entered the UA and Walt's Forensic Anthropology Program and would receive the requisite training that I expected and mentoring that was beyond expectation. This was Walt's strongest asset, the one-to-one mentoring of a student, locking eyes with them to ensure that a key point was absolutely understood. For

sure, he could teach a classroom full of students, but by watching and listening to him outside the classroom as he engaged in all of the various aspects of a forensic anthropology examination was where the real learning occurred. His ability to communicate with colleagues, students, the medico-legal community, and the news media was such a joy to experience. Walt was genuine and unflappable, combining competence and confidence in a manner fitting of a US Marine.

Those of us who knew him well have many Walt stories, most are humorous and all are heart-felt. Like one's children, it's impossible to choose a favorite. But even if you only met him once, you too would have a Walt story—this same story is shared with all who knew Walter Birkby well. That story would be the time when you first met and his eyes locked on yours while he extended his hand and said "Hi, I'm Walt." I witnessed this story too many times to count, from inside his Human Identification Laboratory (HIL) on the 4th floor of the Anthropology

Building to the social gatherings at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS). In 1986, the first time I attended this meeting, watching Dr. Birkby interact with his peers was eye-opening. It didn't take one long after rolling into Tucson and onto the UA campus' Department of Anthropology and Arizona State Museum to learn that Walt was a Big Fish in our pond, but what a joy it was to see his colleagues seek out his opinion on all things related to forensic anthropology. For a graduate student to realize that their mentor is a Big Fish in the biggest forensic science pond has to be one of the most satisfying moments of their training. Walt loved swapping casework related stories with his colleagues and enjoyed being in their company even more. That feeling appeared to be mutual.

Dr. Birkby loved his job, "wouldn't trade it for any other," and was in the HIL five days a week, always arriving well before the students. This hour or two in the early morning was usually the only time the lab was quiet. Coffee was brewed and shared among some of the professors who also had offices on the 4th floor. A few more even rode the slow elevator up to the top floor. As much as Walt loved his job, he was fond

of saying that fellow forensic anthropologist and UA alumnus Dr. Clyde Collins Snow had the best job in the field. Dr. Snow, who worked for the Federal Aviation Administration, was involved with the anthropometry of flight attendants (at the time all women) so that their seating and uniforms could be better fitted. This was an example of Walt's sense of humor—and a great story about one of his friends. Walt and Clyde had been graduate students together in the 1960s and knew each other well. While most of the decedents that would become part of Dr. Birkby's casework were unrelated and from single-incident type scenarios, the work that Dr. Snow was doing in Argentina in the mid-1980s was of a decidedly different bent. I first met Dr. Snow in New Orleans, being introduced to him by Walt at that AAFS meeting in 1986. I chatted with him about how the humanitarian-focused forensic anthropology was unfolding in South America. Little could I know at the time that my own professional career, first succeeding Dr. Birkby as the forensic anthropologist for the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME), then being faced with the challenges of identifying foreign national migrants who died in the Arizona Sonoran Desert,

that the type of forensic anthropology Dr Snow was heading up in Argentina would one day be integrated into how we conduct our forensic anthropology examinations at the PCOME. Dr. Birkby taught me much of what I know about forensic anthropology and introduced me to his colleagues who could broaden my experience. He did this for all of his graduate students.

Walt exhibited a rare blend of grace, knowledge, wisdom, fidelity, and fairness. His dedicated work ethic and dry, at some times black, sense of humor were well known to his friends, family, and students. He cared about his graduate students and we in turn cared for him. Walter Birkby was a genuinely nice man who was equal parts practitioner, teacher,

and mentor. During the course of their education and training, graduate students are presented with many hurdles, some being well-marked on the track to the doctoral degree while others are not. Walt helped his students navigate and clear most of these hurdles. I know he helped me. As his students graduated and embarked upon their professional careers, there remained one last hurdle to clear. This last hurdle appeared a bit higher than all of the others that had been cleared and was placed on the track not by the university or by Dr Birkby, but by each one of us and was unmistakably marked: Would Walt be proud to call me his student? There can be no better measure of a student valuing and appreciating their mentor than this.