

NEWS

Woodstock 2012: a homage to Chris Wood



When a leader in a field approaches retirement, unusual things begin to occur. Normally reticent individuals may become more extrovert, begin whispering furtively behind their hands, mention ‘festivals’ and ‘symposia’ in the same breath. And the room might suddenly fall silent when particular individuals wander past. This is possibly an over-embellishment of the machinations that ensued about 2 years ago, but when two groups of friends independently

approached Chris Wood about the tender topic of celebrating his impending retirement from McMaster University, Canada, Wood put them in touch with each other: and ‘Woodstock 2012’ was born.

‘We wanted an event that would be equal parts good science and good fun, because that’s very Chris’, recalls Katie Gilmour – one of the original plotters – from the University of Ottawa, Canada. And when Gilmour gauged interest amongst the community she was overwhelmed by the enthusiastic response. ‘We sent out an email to about 100 people and 84 replied saying various versions of yes, including, “Yes I will mortgage my house to be there”.’ Realising that they were on to a winning formula, the committee needed to select the ideal destination. ‘Chris has always had a love of red wine, so we knew we had to be in a part of the world with a good selection of wine’, says Steve Perry, also from the University of Ottawa. ‘And he has always raved about Tuscany’, adds Gilmour, so Nic Bury from Kings College London, UK, and Talja Dempster from the Society for Experimental Biology (SEB), were dispatched to reconnoitre the area. Then, having selected the idyllic Abbazia di Spineto – a modernised 11th century monastery – the committee focused their attention on the science.

‘In terms of the meeting, it was easy to identify three areas that were synonymous with Chris, so those were the themes that set the programme’, Perry remembers. Settling on ionic and acid–base regulation, from fundamental to applied research; feeding and nitrogen handling; and gas exchange, exercise and metabolism, the organising team invited speakers ranging from recently hired faculty through long-term collaborators and colleagues with a shared passion for science. ‘We did not want to only have people who were Chris’s students and post-docs, we wanted to have good science in interesting areas across a wide range of people’, explains Gilmour.

With the stage set, delegates ranging from a 3 week old baby to the guest of honour, accompanied by his own family, converged on the sleepy Tuscan venue for a 3 day festival of ‘fishiology’. ‘It was overwhelming’, recalls Wood, adding, ‘There was beautiful food, fantastic wine and then all my friends, colleagues, all my former students and post-docs giving science talks, but laughing at me at the same time’.

One highlight of the symposium for Wood and the delegates was Bill Milsom’s plenary lecture. Recalling that Dave Randall, who was originally invited to open the symposium, had to cancel at the last minute, Wood explains that Milsom was called in at the eleventh hour and quickly picked up the Woodstock theme. ‘He put together this amazing presentation and co-opted me to go to Vancouver to participate in it. He had a videographer do a whole take-off of Woodstock. We dressed up like hippies and the videographer interspersed serious interviews with me with clips of us in 1960s clothing. It was really something, it was just a lovely presentation’, reminisces Wood. In addition, he recollects the high calibre of the talks. ‘Everyone gave big picture talks, broad concept talks. No one gave data-intensive presentations, it was all about the ideas and I think ideas are way more important than data’, Wood chuckles.

Reflecting on Wood’s influence on the field of comparative physiology and the dynasty of over 100 scientists that he has founded, Gilmour says, ‘There were common themes in many of the talks; like taking a snooze when you can and his work ethic – work hard, play hard, but most of all work hard. He’s always working’. Perry adds, ‘Chris is often the first one in a particular area’. Mentioning the multifunctional gut symposium, Perry says,



Woodstock 2012 poster designed by Pat Wright, based on the original Woodstock poster from 1969

‘There were some people before him, but ultimately Chris was the one who got that field going, popularised it and then to his credit let others take it on’.

However, the celebration didn’t end when Woodstock broke up after the conference dinner. A day later, many of the delegates headed north to Salzburg, Austria, and the SEB Annual Meeting where Wood had been invited to give the prestigious Bidder lecture. Opening his presentation with a homage to many of the greats of comparative physiology, Wood went on to describe one of his main passions, which he refers to affectionately as ‘expeditionary physiology’. Describing expeditions to remote Pacific islands, the Amazon River and Lake Magadi in Kenya, Wood humorously recounted the challenges of doing paradigm-shifting science in trying environments.

However, despite all this talk of retirement, Wood isn’t really hanging up his research boots. ‘I have about a year and a half to

go at McMaster’, he says, and then he’s heading west to his *alma mater*, the University of British Columbia. ‘I did my first two degrees at UBC and I have always felt at home when I visited the Zoology Department’, he explains. But even then he hardly plans to sit back. ‘I will move the whole operation to UBC’, he says before reeling off the list of expeditions that he’s planning to take as soon as his McMaster committee days are over. ‘We’re going back to Lake Magadi in Africa next year and I have a Science Without Borders fellowship in Brazil, so for the next 3 years I’ll be going for 2 months of the year to work in Manaus. I have also been talking to Yuxiang Wang about going back to Lake Qinghai in China’, he smiles, promising, ‘I hope to be able to keep doing expeditionary physiology as long as the body holds up’.

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