Longtime Medicine Professor Leaves Legacy of Mentoring, Research

UA College of Medicine ? Phoenix
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Mark Haussler [1] correlates teaching medical students with treating patients.

"The secret is to care," he said. "Care about their learning and treat them with respect."

Haussler, who is retiring after 45 years with the UA, knows a thing or two about teaching. He estimates that he has taught more than 3,500 students during his illustrious career.

"I absolutely loved it," he said.

The list of scientists trained in Haussler's lab is a Who's Who of researchers, physicians and professors. A Regents' Professor Emeritus, Haussler has received numerous honors; he was the recipient of the Valley of the Sun endowed professorship, Basic Sciences Educator Lifetime Award, William F. Neuman Award for outstanding contributions in the area of bone and mineral research and the Career Contributions to Vitamin D Research Award. In 2005, he was recognized by the National Institutes of Health as a principal investigator in the top 5 percentile of funding for all NIH grant awardees in the previous 25 years.

Haussler considers his greatest career accomplishment to be the discovery of the vitamin D receptor, which he describes as "the lock that accepts a key to the body to absorb calcium."

He remembers the day he and his fellow researchers found the monoclonal antibody to the vitamin D receptor.

"I went out to the store in Tucson and bought three bottles of champagne and brought it back to the lab," he said. "We went to a picnic ground through Gates Pass and we celebrated."

He remains passionate about the importance of vitamin D.

"We all need to take vitamin D in order to not only have proper bone mineralization and strength, but many other systems in the body are dependent on optimal vitamin D," he said.

Haussler recommends taking 2,000 units of vitamin D a day to prevent chronic diseases.

"Everybody has to replenish their vitamin D," he said. "It's erroneous thinking that we get enough from the sun, even in Arizona."

If Haussler's best accomplishment as a researcher is his work with vitamin D, his best contribution as a professor at the UA in Tucson and Phoenix is mentoring students.

Haussler says it's the essence of teaching.
"I'm so proud of those I mentored," he said, adding that his students have gone on to Harvard Medical School, Johns Hopkins, MIT and St. Jude's Hospital, just to mention a few. Some of his former students have also been named to the National Academy of Sciences. He considers those he mentored as his legacy.

He also loves that he has mentored more than one generation of medical school students in a family. He taught Dr. Mark Solem in Tucson and was thrilled when he was able to teach Dr. Casey Solem, who was in the first graduating class from the College of Medicine ? Phoenix. Both Solems are emergency physicians, Mark in Payson and Casey in Phoenix. Also among those he taught are Dr. Jacque Chadwick, vice dean of the UA College of Medicine ? Phoenix.

Haussler said he realized it was time to retire when Taylor Pitt, a third-year student, told him that Haussler knew her grandfather.

"Sure enough, her grandfather is Michael Pitt, a brilliant radiologist from Tucson," he said. "We published a host of papers together in Tucson in the 1970s."

Haussler's advice to medical students is to be up-to-date scientifically and to embrace technology. But the most important priority is to show compassion to patients, he said.

Helped Hire Founding Basic Science Faculty

Haussler was the first and only basic science faculty member to arrive at the UA College of Medicine ? Phoenix 10 years ago. He helped recruit new faculty for the school, adding six basic medical scientists from Arizona State University. That initial group then set up a mini-symposium, where they interviewed eight candidates at a time for faculty positions.

"He got research going here," said Ron Hammer, a College of Medicine ? Phoenix professor. "He brought in his grants, and he brought in people who brought in their grants, and he really started an intellectual center for a college of medicine in Phoenix."

Haussler said coming to Phoenix and helping establish the College of Medicine was invigorating, after teaching in Tucson for 35 years.

Nancy Gwilliam, department administrator for Basic Medical Sciences at the college, said she found a home while being interviewed for a position by Haussler.

After her interview, she said, she knew the department had "heart and soul and a foundation of goodness."

Science was His First Love

Haussler became interested in science as a child. His father, a structural engineer, was a frustrated chemist and physicist, so father and son would do experiments in their garage, and Haussler took off from there.

"Both my mom and dad influenced me equally to science, but also teaching and mentoring, and I fell in love with mentoring," he said.

He was valedictorian of his class at Polytechnic High School in Los Angeles, graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry from UCLA and received his doctorate in
biochemistry from the University of California, Riverside. He did his postdoctoral fellowship in biochemistry at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine.

On July 1, 1971, he began his career at the UA College of Medicine ? Tucson, in the biochemistry department.

He has two daughters, one a physician and the other a journalist. He and his wife, Carol, who was a member of his scientific research team for 30 years until her retirement in 2010 and currently manages research grants and contracts at the College of Medicine ? Phoenix, love to spoil their four grandchildren.

Haussler taught his final class in November. Since then, he has been traveling and helping plan a symposium in his honor, which was held April 20 at the college. The topic was "Molecular Medicine From Stem Cells to Cancer: Neuroendocrine Control of Metabolism, Update on Genomics, Gene Editing and Epigenetic Analysis to Elucidate Mechanisms of Transcriptional Control." It featured six prominent researchers who were taught by Haussler.

Ever the scientist, Haussler plans to return to the lab, even in retirement.

"I want to get back into the lab and do some fundamental research," he said.

A tribute video [6] to Haussler can be viewed on YouTube.