In Memoriam: Thomas Meixner was dedicated to 'making the world better through biogeochemistry'

University Communications
October 2022

The University of Arizona and the Tucson community mourn the loss of Thomas Meixner, department head and professor of hydrology and atmospheric sciences, who was killed in a campus shooting on Wednesday afternoon.

Meixner grew up in Maryland playing in streams and digging in the garden. As an adult, he carried that same passion for water and the environment throughout his research.

Meixner is remembered as an incredible son, brother, husband, father, uncle, colleague and friend, and as an optimistic, selfless and a passionate teacher.

Meixner is survived by his wife, Kathleen Cotter Meixner, and sons Sean and Brendan.

"He was passionate about hydrology, and one of the last acts he performed on this Earth was to teach a class. He described his work as 'making the world better through biogeochemistry,' but to us, he was trying to save the world's most precious resource," his family wrote in a statement. "He recently retweeted the following quote: 'Hope is not optimism, which expects things to turn out well, but something rooted in the conviction that there is good worth working for.' Tom certainly lived this. He will be forever loved and missed by so many who knew him."

Meixner studied water in arid and semi-arid regions, with a focus on the American Southwest, which eventually became his home. His research interests included understanding how water influences the biology and geology of landscapes as well as where rivers source their water, urban hydrology in desert cities and the effect of climate change on groundwater recharge. His work spanned environments as diverse as desert scrub and Alpine ecosystems from scales small to large.

"Tom was a wonderful person, whose larger-than-life approach to being and doing inspired those around him and elevated the community. The world is different without him," said Carmala Garzione, dean of the College of Science. "As a cancer survivor, Tom shared with me that he chose to live life to the fullest and focus on things that are valuable to him and beneficial to the people around him. He was a beloved member of our College of Science community and lived up to this statement in every way. In the face of challenges, he always provided a positive and forward-moving approach. His energy and passion for life, his work, his students and the people he supported were uplifting. We have lost a dear friend and colleague."

Meixner earned his bachelor's degree in history of science, as well as soil and water conservation from the University of Maryland, College Park in 1992. He then came to the University of Arizona, where he earned his doctoral degree in hydrology and water resources in 1999, with work focused on Alpine biogeochemistry.

He worked as an assistant professor in environmental sciences at the University of California, Riverside until 2004, before returning to the University as an assistant professor. He gained full professorship in 2015 and became department head in 2019.

"Dr. Meixner, an international force in his field of hydrology and atmospheric sciences and a kind and warm man, had a tremendous impact on his department and the students he mentored," University of Arizona President Robert C. Robbins wrote in a message to campus Thursday. "Our hearts break for his family, students, colleagues, and our entire campus community. He set a wonderful example for all of us on how to be a true servant leader in life, and he will not be forgotten."

"Tom was an outstanding faculty member who managed to do everything with the highest level of professionalism and impact," said Liesl Folks, senior vice president for academic affairs and provost. "His thoughtful approaches to solving the problems of today to ensure a brighter future for us all were evident across the breadth of his career. Above all, he was a kind and gentle presence in our lives. I am deeply saddened by this loss of a beloved member of our campus community."

"Tom Meixner was such an impactful and enthusiastic scholar. He was prodigious, incredibly well respected, truly giving of his time and ideas—especially to his students—and just emblematic of what the community of scholars at the University of Arizona seek to do: change the world," said Elizabeth 'Betsy' Cantwell, senior vice president for research, innovation and impact. "I cannot express how much he will be missed by our entire research community."

Michael Worobey, who heads the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, remembered Meixner as “one of a kind, incredibly smart, who always seemed to put his intelligence to work making the university community better and lifting up those around him.”

Meixner was known to make weather forecasts. Worobey said, recalling a recent interaction that showed how much the late professor cared for those around him.

"The last time I saw him was at a recent College of Science reception," Worobey said. "Right at the end, a surprise storm hit, unleashing a respectable monsoon rain dump. Tom apologized, so sincerely, that he hadn't had time to generate a forecast that day that could have helped people plan around the storm. That was Tom in a nutshell—caring about those around him to a ludicrous, lovely, lovable degree, to the extent that he took personal responsibility for the weather. His loss is immeasurable."

This article originally appeared on the University News website.

Source URL: https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/story/making-world-better-through-biogeochemistry-remembering-thomas-meixner

Links
[1] https://uaatwork.arizona.edu
[2] https://science.arizona.edu/
[3] https://view.comms.arizona.edu/?op=05&box=317a799b10991776156e8a1250a6671d834343c049053b3b2cbca88e686bf110998004b5264eaddb54fafa8d8ed3a0d48bf3eebb1bb5f424f9d5d4d4bf1179462579be12261c0c8630e
[4] https://provoaz.arizona.edu/
[5] https://research.arizona.edu/
[6] https://eeb.arizona.edu/
[7] https://news.arizona.edu/story/making-world-better-through-biogeochemistry%e2%80%93-remembering-thomas-meixner/