In Memoriam: John Paul SanGiovanni

School of Nutritional Sciences and Wellness
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John Paul SanGiovanni, associate professor in the School of Nutritional Sciences and Wellness and member of the BIOS Institute, died Sept. 25 at 58. His family, friends, colleagues and students remember him as a kind and caring man who dedicated himself to serving others through personal connection and through his groundbreaking research career.

"John Paul was a passionate and accomplished scientist with a remarkable breadth and depth to his work," said Scott Going, former director and professor emeritus in the School of Nutritional Sciences and Wellness. "He had a stellar career, and his scientific achievements were extremely impressive. But it was his zest for life and commitment to the people around him that will be missed most. He was always eager to help his colleagues and students – and their students and their families – in whatever way was needed."

SanGiovanni joined the faculty at the University of Arizona in 2019, after nearly two decades at the National Institutes of Health, where he helped develop food- and nutrient-based therapies for neurodegenerative and cardiovascular diseases. While there, he led large-scale, multicenter phase three clinical trials that resulted in standard-of-care treatments for age-related macular degeneration and won multiple NIH Director's Awards.

At the University of Arizona, SanGiovanni and his team employed emerging technologies and methodologies to advance understanding of how our bodies interact with specific nutrients on a molecular level and how genetics influence individual responses to those nutrients. His goal was to apply this knowledge to develop personalized interventions – to make better cures, for more people, more quickly.

"John Paul was interested in how our molecular biology functions in the context of not just the foods that we eat, but the complex compounds that are contained in the food and the biological mechanisms that enable us to derive benefit from them," explained Steven Winston, emeritus director of the Idaho National Laboratory and founder of the CrisiScience Collaborative, where SanGiovanni was a member. "He also understood that it's not just about the nutrients themselves but how you present them – both so that the body can actually use them, and so that people actually want to eat them."

SanGiovanni was an internationally recognized scholar on molecular nutrition. His work at the University was supported by the NIH and the National Science Foundation, among others. He was the founding director of the Center for Nutrient-Responsive Systems and the director of food and nutrition programs for the NSF Center to Stream Health Care in Place. His professional memberships included the American Society for Nutrition, the American Society of Human Genetics, the International Society for the Study of Fatty Acids and Lipids and the American Society for Experimental Neurotherapeutics.

SanGiovanni's groundbreaking research has been cited more than 20,000 times and has been published in prestigious journals including Science, Nature Medicine, the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences and the Journal of the American Medical Association. His career research interests spanned the fields of nutritional biochemistry, biostatistics, visual psychophysics, neuroscience and epidemiological research design.

"He personified the 'specialist generalist' to a greater degree than anyone I've ever encountered," Winston said. "He could burrow into the deepest details of the most universal subjects and pick out nuggets others would never see."

SanGiovanni is survived by his wife, Brigitte, sons Jean-Philippe and Daniel, his parents and his siblings. Services were held in October in Maryland.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations be made in his name to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

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