

## Remembering Dr Debnath

The first time that I ever talked with Dr. Debnath was when he called me up on the phone for a prearranged phone job interview, while I was visiting assistant professor at the University of Central Florida. He began by introducing himself and then he went over his own bio explaining how he used to be the department chair at University of Central Florida and that he was the one that hired several of the faculty there, and then went down the list one by one naming and talking about several of my UCF colleagues. It took a while to go through all that. When he was done then he asks: "So, have you gotten to know Dr. A?" and goes through the list all over again asking me questions like: "what's the news about Dr. B?", "how is Dr. C doing?" etc. Because I had gotten to know most of my UCF colleagues, I had detailed responses for each question and as a result it took forever to go once again through the whole list, and in the meantime, I was wondering in the back of my head when is he going to start interviewing me? In any case, towards the end, I think we talked about the position and about research but the part that I still remember vividly is how he went through asking me questions about every single one of my UCF colleagues that he recruited and hired when he was the chair there. In hindsight, I think he must have seen an opportunity to find out how his former colleagues are doing, about whom he obviously cared very much, but also to figure out what kind of colleague I would be, if he were to offer me a position, by getting a read on how I managed to relate with all these other people that he knew so well and for so long.

Dr. Debnath helped me throughout my stay at UTPA. We had many conversations, and he shared many stories. I remember when he saw that I published a paper in Journal of Fluid Mechanics, he came by my office to tell me, "You know Elef, George Batchelor created that journal, and although Dr. Lighthill was my Ph.D. advisor, Dr. Batchelor was the one signing off my grad student stipends". He told me about many other stories like that.

Like with so many others, Dr. Debnath always had a lot of good advice and was an excellent mentor and helped me put together my tenure and promotion file, as well as make suggestions for possible external reviewers. The most impactful advice however that I ever got from him was when he told me to go run for the Faculty Senate. I would have never done that on my own, but he told me that I should do it, without explaining why, and when I mumbled that nah! I'm too busy and have too many things to do, he said: "look! all you have to do is go to a meeting once a month, sit in the back of the room, and take a nap!" That convinced me, and of course I ended up doing the exact opposite of that, sitting at the front of the room, and running my mouth off. I suspect that he knew all along that this was exactly what was going to happen, and he only said what needed to be said and nothing more. But simply following that small piece of advice made a tremendous impact in my own professional development.

Dr. Debnath was an old-school academic that was committed to the fundamental mission of academic institutions to create and disseminate knowledge, and that was his primary focus which he did with his own work but also through identifying and helping so many of us to start our careers. His vision stands in stark contrast to the inverted corporate university vision of research being just a means to the end of acquiring external funds. He recruited and helped a broad range of research mathematicians that did interesting work rather than follow "trends" and go for what was "fashionable".

I noticed that he was strategic about team building and thoughtful about recruiting a wide portfolio of faculty that together would make for a strong Department. He was also a fighter and was willing to do everything that could possibly be done to help the faculty that he recruited when facing difficulties with

their tenure and promotion from the upper-level administration. He told me several stories about how he helped other faculty including faculty from UCF to get tenure. In one case he went to the UCF President's office to convince him (and did convince him) to overturn a negative Provost recommendation for a UCF tenure-track faculty, who in the end did get tenure and then had an outstanding long career.

I learned a lot from him and admired and respected his way of looking at these issues, and his unyielding tenacity. I still remember vividly a conversation that I had with him after getting tenure in front of his office in the hallway where he told me: "all these other things are temporary, but a research publication is a permanent contribution to humanity". This idea of academic legacy was very important to him.

If you read some of his books, you can close your eyes and imagine hearing the text in his voice, him being there in your office, sitting next to you, and talking to you. He loved telling stories and you can see him in his writing telling many interesting stories and anecdotes in between the presentation of mathematical concepts. For some reason, all of that was very meaningful to him, and he wanted all those other people, some that he knew personally, but also historical figures from long ago, well known for their mathematical accomplishments, to be known and remembered, not only for what they did, but also for who they were. And perhaps, in a way this is a lesson for us, that we should also be willing to tell stories and make sure that people like him and many others that cross our lives are also remembered for who they are and not only for what they accomplished.

Eleftherios Gkioulekas

March 6, 2023

Edinburg, TX