Thoughts of Mike: Eulogy for Mike White by Chuck Peden, 9/21/07

It has been the highlight of my career to have worked very closely with Mike over the last few years since he accepted a joint appointment at PNNL to become the founding director of the Institute for Interfacial Catalysis at our DOE National Lab. Mike certainly didn't come to PNNL with anything to prove – with his 40 or so years on the faculty of the Chemistry Department at the University of Texas, the large number of truly outstanding and very successful students that he advised and mentored during that tenure, the 700 or so scientific journal publications that he coauthored with his research group at UT, the collaborative research institutions that he directed at the University of Texas, and his many scientific and teaching awards from organizations such as the American Chemical Society and the National Science Foundation, his remarkably distinguished career in science and university education speaks for itself. In the scientific community that I am involved in, Mike is regarded as one of the giants – a pioneer and a recognized leader world-wide.

So, why did he choose at this stage of his career to embark on such a new endeavor, one that would require a considerable effort on his part to realize? I think at least two motivations were critical. First, Mike maintained a true love of the scientific enterprise and would still get incredibly excited to obtain and think about new results from the lab. I shared an office complex with Mike at PNNL and I can't tell you the number of times he would excitedly lure me into his office to listen to one of his post-doctoral fellows tell me about some new results they'd just obtained. His enthusiasm was infectious and, despite all of the remarkable discoveries he has made in his research career, he always seemed most proud of the latest results from the new collaborations he established at PNNL – he was really stimulated by the research environment and the scientific problems he could work on at PNNL. I believe Mike expected to remain research active and be thinking about new science for some time to come.

But even more motivation than this, I think, was Mike's deep and sincere concerns about the energy security of our nation and our planet – a security that is threatened not only by dwindling traditional resources such as fossil fuels, but also by the impacts on climate change from the use of these traditional resources. Mike felt he could make a contribution to solving these issues – perhaps not by any single dramatic discovery, but by leading the sometimes long and hard work of research in an area he believed could truly make meaningful progress on solving these problems. In his relatively short tenure here, Mike's impact on future research directions of the US Department of Energy in general and PNNL in particular was, simply put, ***huge***.

As essential as Mike's scientific reputation and his technical contributions were to the launching and early successes of this new research institute at PNNL, to the now universal reputation that this new institute has as one of the leading organizations for catalysis research and development in the world, his biggest contributions were much more personal. It was Mike's personality and his honest and genuine affection for the people he worked with that made him the truly unique individual that he was. I know of no single person who met Mike that did not like and respect him, and want to join him to do the important work that he believed needed to be done.

I wanted to especially highlight this non-technical aspect of Mike's leadership today and do so with a couple of specific examples from my personal interactions with him. In fact, I've known him a long time; over 20 years. As a fresh-faced post-doctoral fellow in 1983, Mike was one of the first persons I met in what was then for me a very new field of research. Despite this long association, however, I have discovered over the last couple of weeks that I had no unique story to tell even though I've always ***felt*** that I had, in fact, had ***several*** unique interactions with him. So let me tell you something about the last couple of weeks.

As Mike's associate director for the Institute for Interfacial Catalysis at PNNL, I had the difficult responsibility of informing our institute's large community of members, partners and friends of Mike's passing. As such, I have received untold numbers of messages of shock, sadness, comments about how devastating of a loss Mike's passing is to the scientific community, and then some recounting of the special experiences the many individuals who wrote to me had had with Mike. What I found in reading these many special experiences – note these messages came from a number of the world's scientific leaders – is that they were essentially the same as my "unique" experiences. In fact, the incidences these folks described were ***not***, by any means, all drawn from interactions as colleagues, where both the individual and Mike were on essentially equal footing with regard to their scientific reputations. Instead, large numbers of these individuals had experiences with Mike early in their careers that, as it was for me, had great influence on their future success. In these cases, the description of the first encounter with Mike would inevitably go something like this. The individual, during the very early stages of their career – perhaps as a graduate student or a post-doc – would meet Mike and get quizzed on what they were doing in their research work. Now, this can be very intimidating when the quizzing is coming from one of the leaders of the field. But this wasn't really

a test. Rather, it represented Mike's genuine scientific interest in what even a graduate student was doing – Mike was always learning after all – but even more so, the interactions would occur because of Mike's genuine concern for the individual themselves. This was not only a concern for the individual's future career but even more importantly the individual as a person. Invariably, he would make the individual feel that their research and their future research career were specially important to Mike. And the individual would feel that they had ***uniquely*** obtained the interest and respect of this great scientist – clearly the individual must be a special person themselves and doing uniquely special work to be worthy of such attention.

So there are two things that I hope are clear from my new discovery that I don't have a unique story to tell you today. First, Mike didn't care whether you were a scientist of the highest reputation, even a Nobel Prize winner, or an incredibly green student or post-doc trying to become sufficiently familiar with Mike's scientific field – he would afford you his genuinely felt respect and interest. Secondly, he did this in such a caring manner that every encounter seemed like a unique one – he made everyone feel that they were special to him. Clearly this is why it was so easy to become such a dear friend to him – it was Mike who displayed all the important characteristics of a friend – who couldn't like and respect him?

Despite how profoundly we will miss his leadership of the Institute for Interfacial Catalysis at PNNL as we "press on" in his absence, it is Mike's caring friendship that we will miss the most.