Short Communication

In memoriam: Costas Drainas (1950–2011)

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ABSTRACT

This is a short recollection of C. Drainas research and memoirs on occasion of his untimely death.

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“Loved, idealized voices
of those who have died, or of those lost for us like the
dead.
Sometimes they speak to us in dreams; sometimes deep
in thought the mind hears them.
And, with their sound, for a moment return, sounds
from our life's first poetry, like distant music fading
away at night”
(Konstantinos P. Kavafis)

Constantin (Costas) Drainas, Professor of Biochemical Molecular Genetics and Biotechnology, Department of Chemistry, University of Ioannina, Greece (January 19, 1950) passed away untimely the past July 5, 2011.

Costas obtained his BA degree in Biology from the University of Patras on 1972 and his PhD degree in Biochemical Genetics from the University of Glasgow, Scotland on 1978. After four years as a post-doctoral fellow in UCLA-USA (1978–1981) and one year long term EMBO fellowship in St. Andrews University, Scotland (1981–1982) he returned to Greece and was appointed as lecturer at the Department of Chemistry, University of Ioannina where he served as a full Professor since 1997. He has taught many undergraduate classes in Biochemistry, Molecular Biology, Genetics and Evolutionary Biology at

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the Departments of Chemistry and Biological Applications and Technologies of the University of Ioannina, as well post-graduate seminars on Biotechnology of Microorganisms. His area of research was on Microbial Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. His particular interest was the investigation of biochemical and genetic mechanisms of microorganisms, with emphasis in: (i) Study of osmoregulation mechanisms especially under salt or sugar stress; (ii) Development of gene transfer and reporter systems for microorganisms of industrial or environmental interest; (iii) Development of genetic tools for studying gene expression; (iv) Study of mobile genetic elements and in particular conjugal mobilization mechanisms in bacteria; (v) Molecular characterization of environmental microorganisms; (vi) Study of membrane lipids metabolism in microorganisms, (vii) Biochemical and genetic regulation of new metabolic pathways of xenobiotic compounds, and (viii) Study of metabolic mechanisms of industrial or environmental interest. His published record includes over 65 full papers in peer reviewed scientific journals (<http://www.uoi.gr/schools/chemistry/index.files/>).

At the educational level, Costas Drinas organized the curriculum of studies of two undergraduate programs leading to a Bachelor's degree in Biochemistry and in Applied Biology. He supervised 17 PhD theses and numerous dissertations at the undergraduate and post-graduate level.

Outside the University, Costas Drinas served as the National Representative of Greece to DGXII of the European Union and as a member of the Council of Research and Technology of Greece. He was presently President of the Hellenic Society of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology and member of the FEBS Biochemical Education Committee. He organized a two weeks European workshop (DGXII) on Plasmid Stability and Horizontal Gene Transfer in Ioannina-1996 and a FEBS Education Workshop in Athens-2010. He co-tutored Problem Based Learning working teams and co-facilitated small-group discussions on post-graduate education on May 2010 and May 2011.

Costas was a very active and well known member of the International Society of Plasmid Biology (he and his group co-organized the Plasmid Biology Meeting held in Corfu-2004), and participated in many of the bi-annual meetings (the Plasmid Biology series).

REMEMBRANCES

Amalia Afendra (*Department of Biological Applications and Technologies, University of Ioannina, Greece*). I met Costas when I was a student. He was my professor, my PhD and my post-doc supervisor, and then I was one of his collaborators after I became a staff member of the University of Ioannina myself. In his lab I enjoyed the enthusiasm of working with bacterial genetics (and I will always be grateful for it), I felt the disappointment when the experiments did not work, and, of course, I argued with him several times about the typical disagreements between a supervisor and a student (which I experience now as a supervisor and I understand him so well...). Thanks to him, all his students (including myself) received grants for our studies,

attended many congresses, meetings, workshops, learned how to organize them, and because of all these I was capable of having an "international" (if I may say) point of view concerning scientific matters. He insisted on that and I will be grateful for this, too. He used to face us equally. His office was open for us 24 h a day, his home was our home, and his family was our family. Not a typical supervisor's behavior, as far as I know. Costas was an excellent and inspired scientist and lots of pages could be written about his achievements. However, what I personally want to state here is that he knew how to make strong and true friendships, apart from the different opinions and points of view. His collaborators from all over the world considered him firstly as a friend and then as a colleague. I certainly owe him a lot. He was such an alive person with all kind of activities – this makes it even harder to realize that we will not see him again. I do not want to say goodbye to him or to think that I will meet him sometime in the so called life after death. Instead, I want to keep him in my heart, remember him as he was, consider him as a role model for my future life, and from time to time say "hi" to him with a nice Greek song, like the ones he enjoyed dancing or playing in his guitar.

Athanasia Varsaki (*Centro de Investigación y Formación Agrarias, Gobierno de Cantabria, Muriel, Spain*) The 6th of July is the beginning of a great festivity in Spain. It is the first day of the Festival of San Fermín in Pamplona. Nevertheless, this day brings sad memories to me, as on the 7th of July 2000, I lost my dear grandmother. From now on I will have another reason to feel sad; on the 5th of July 2011 Prof. Constantin (Costas for his friends) Drinas departed this mortal life. Costas' sudden death came as a shock to all of us. I was informed by an e-mail and I felt as if I was kicked in the stomach. The first thing that crossed my mind was that this must be a bad joke. But who could be joking with such serious matters? I entered in the University's web page. I thought, if it is true, there must be something announced there. When I saw the notice, I started realizing what was happening, even if I did not want to accept it. I always thought that I was meant to write scientific articles with him. I never thought that at some point of my life I would have to write an "in memoriam" for him; not so soon anyway! He left too young and he will be missed not only by his family but also by the people who saw themselves as part of his family: his intellectual children.

I knew Costas from my undergraduate years in the University of Ioannina (Greece). He was my professor and after that he became the supervisor of my Master degree, my PhD and my first post-doc. I spent 10 years working in his lab and when I left Greece we never lost contact. I remember Costas was never very easy on giving compliments. Maybe that was his way of teaching us that we need to work hard and that in this life nothing was going to be given to us as a gift. However, every time he was telling us "Well done!" we knew that we were given the best reward. Over the last 5 years that I was abroad, I must have spoken to him on the phone or e-mailed him hundreds maybe thousands of times. Often, it was not only to discuss about papers or projects that we were going to submit but also to catch up with the gossip. I did not always agree

with what he said. Sometimes, I did not fully grasp his point, or he did not fully grasp mine. I argued with him many times and I might even have said things that I should have silenced. But, no matter the differences, I admired and appreciated him a lot. He was my intellectual father, as he was for everyone else that worked with him. Those of us who were privileged to know Costas have lost a dear colleague and friend who inspired us with his incisive observations and always keen and sparkling remarks. His departure from the stage of life is a loss to the whole scientific world, leaving a big empty space. Charles Bukowski in one of his poems entitled “Lifedance” describes:

“The area dividing the brain and the soul is affected in many ways by experience—some lose all mind and become soul: insane. Some lose all soul and become mind: intellectual. Some lose both and become: accepted”

Costas was one of the few academics that had kept both mind and soul. He was a teacher, who never stopped learning. A man of extraordinary intellectual and creative power and will be remembered by all of us – his students – as an excellent educator, and a warm and loving human being. His life ended too soon, still, we who mourn him have the consolation that his work will outlive us. Costas is no longer with us in the flesh, but his spirit will be giving us light. I find it hard to believe that I can no longer give him a call in order to ask him about what he thinks on a

particular situation. I will never hear him telling me again: “Well done Athanasia!” and I will miss him every time that I will be doing something and I will not be able to let him know. I think we should always keep in mind Costas’ example of integrity and optimism as we try to continue the work that consumed his life and is so much a part of ours. Today we mourn his death but we should also celebrate his wonderful and influential life. He lived life to the fullest, and way, way beyond. He had a wonderful family, friends throughout the world and he will be remembered not only as the brilliant teacher and the worldwide known scientist but also as the wonderful person that he was.

May he rest in peace...!

Manolo Espinosa (*Centro de Investigaciones Biológicas, CSIC, Madrid, Spain*). From a personal point of view, Costas was known to all of us, plasmid biologists, for his sharp and open mind, his sense of humor and his ample and philosophical views on science and society in general. To me, Costas was the most Mediterranean member of the Plasmid Biology community in the highest praise of the term: he was passionate, friendly, never resentful or envious, and always ready for a joke, a smile, and a glass of good wine or beer when time and work permitted a relaxing time. He was a true friend to his friends and open to them. He was always willing to help when he could, without any restriction, and he did it willingly, never expecting any trade-off. Costas warm smile and openness will be reminded by all.