In Remembrance of Alex Nickon
(1927–2021)
I knew what to say, and he was unfailingly encouraging and enthusiastic in his support, but firm in his word and admired him as a scientist from the day I first met him. He was tough-love honest about the up- and downsides of Hopkins—and, as I would later learn, tellingly accurate. It was a full day that went smoothly and well. We had dinner at the Hopkins Club. I was a postdoc of 28 but treated like a colleague. Such things don’t just happen, they are orchestrated by someone paying attention to the details and the moment. Alex was that kind of man.

I took the offer from Hopkins in no small part to have Alex as a real-life colleague. I liked him, trusted him, and appreciated his presence. Alex never forced himself on me with career advice as some senior faculty find difficult to resist doing, or even feel is their duty. He was tough-love honest about the up- and downsides of Hopkins—and, as I would later learn, tellingly accurate. It was a full day that went smoothly and well. We had dinner at the Hopkins Club. I was a postdoc of 28 but treated like a colleague. Such things don’t just happen, they are orchestrated by someone paying attention to the details and the moment. Alex was that kind of man.

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interview visit, on an especially cold December day with the Renssen heating out, and the third floor was frigid. He was bundled in his arctic parka and the meeting went on, business as usual... I also remember his anecdote about the collegiality of the chemistry department that he relayed to us during his luncheon, describing how he voted in UIUC’s departmental vote about foreign language requirements, and their department was so large that no one batted an eye as they counted his vote!” Tom Lectka had a bit more overlap with Alex and had the great good fortune to inherit both his laboratory space and most of his treasure trove of laboratory equipment and “precious chemical intermediates from the legendary ‘Nickon Collection’...” Like J. D., Tom found him to be “an outstanding mentor to me as a young faculty—a kind and gentle man” He was also “a true master of scientific English, and I learned a lot about writing high quality papers from him.”

Perhaps the most unexpected thing to me about Alex was that he was a magician! He and Koji Nakanishi had been roommates as graduate students at Harvard and taught each other sleight of hand, card tricks and other illusions. The first, and only, time I saw him in action I didn’t realize who had done it, but it was at the Departmental Christmas party and a group of young children, mine being one of them, was playing around a low table and suddenly bottle caps randomly started jumping up and off the table. There were squeals of delight and amazement. Straight-faced Alex didn’t let on that he had caused these gravity defying events. Then he started making things disappear and appear from his hands and out of little shirt pockets. A crowd was starting to gather and Alex, ever modest, stopped and declined to continue the show. I was not alone in my childlike disappointment, but I was dazzled too.

Modesty and humility in our line of work to some are viewed as mental defects. To use Gilbert Stork’s term “microphone grabber” is more the behavioral model. I will leave it to my former Chairman, John Toscano to have the last word: “Alex was a special colleague—eternally positive and ever-ready with measured, sage advice. When I first started at Hopkins as an Assistant Professor, Alex was already formally retired, but remained very active in departmental affairs, including a steady, reliable presence at weekly student literature seminars where he always contributed with insightful questions.

Alex volunteered to read drafts of my early manuscripts and grant applications. Not only did I benefit substantially from stimulating discussions with Alex about our research, but because he was a stickler for proper grammar, syntax, and concise language (a true master!), my writing also greatly improved. For sure, I have him to thank for my first accepted manuscript and my first successful grant application.

During the early days of my time as department chair, Alex decided to move to Texas to be closer to his family. In true Alex fashion, he wanted nothing to do with a department party or the like in his honor, but finally relented to a small lunch with his faculty colleagues. Here, we presented him with a Johns Hopkins University chair, inscribed with the following – Alex Nickon, Department of Chemistry, in sincere appreciation of over 50 years as a mentor, colleague, and friend."

*Ave atque vale*

—Craig Townsend, Baltimore, 20 April 2021
Curriculum Vita (A.N., Academic) and Publications

Basic Education
(Edmonton, Alberta Canada)
McCauley Elementary School – Grades 1-3
Alex Taylor Elementary; Norwood Elementary – Grades 4-6
Spruce Avenue Intermediate School – Grades 7-9
10-12: Victoria High School (graduated 1945) – Grades 10-12

Undergraduate
University of Alberta, B.Sc. 1949 (Honors Chemistry)

Graduate
University of Alberta, M.A. 1951 (Organic Chemistry)
Ph.D. 1953 (Organic Chemistry)

Scholarships, Prizes, and Honors

High School:
1945
- Robert Tegler Scholarship (three years tuition at University of Alberta)

At University of Alberta:
1946
- Paul Edward MacLeod Memorial Prize in Chemistry
- First Class Standing
- University of Alberta Honor Prize

1947
- First Class Standing
- University of Alberta Honor Prize

1948
- Chemical Institute of Canada Prize in Chemistry
- Fred H. Irwin Memorial Prize in Organic Chemistry
- First Class Standing
- University of Alberta Honor Prize

1949
- First Class Standing
- University of Alberta Honor Prize
- Governor General’s Gold Medal in Arts & Sciences

At Harvard:
1950-53
- National Institutes of Health Predoctoral Fellowship 1952-Teaching-fellow Prize

1953-55
- Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Fellow, 1957-61
- NSF Senior Postdoctoral Sabbatical Fellow (at Imperial College of Science & technology, London), 1963-64
- Senior Editor of Journal of Organic Chemistry, 1965-71
- NIH, Medicinal Chemistry Study Section, 1966-70
- Elected Fellow of The New York Academy of Sciences, 1967
- MD Sect. ACS, Alter. Councillor & Awards Committee, 1967-69
- Panel for Postdoctorate Research Awards, N.R.C. (USA), 1968-69

Professional Positions Held

Research Assistant to R.B. Sandin, U. of A., 1949-50
Visiting Lecturer, Bryn Mawr College, Jan - Aug 1953
N.R.C. Postdoctorate Fellow, Birkbeck College, University of London, with D.H.R. Barton, 1953-54
N.R.C. Postdoctorate Fellow, National Research Council Labs. Ottawa, with R.N. Jones, 1954-55
Assistant & Associate Professor, Johns Hopkins University, 1955-64
NSF Senior Postdoctorate Fellow, Imperial College, London, 1963-64 Professor of Chemistry, Johns Hopkins University, 1964-75
NSF Senior Postdoctorate Fellow, University Munich, Germany, 1971-72 Vernon K. Krieble Professor of Chemistry, Johns Hopkins University, 1975-94
Vernon K. Krieble Professor Emeritus, Johns Hopkins University, 1994-present

Fellowships, Editorships, Lectureships, etc.

NIH Predoctorate Fellowship (Harvard University), 1950-53
NRC of Canada Postdoctorate Fellowships, held at Birkbeck College, London; and Ottawa, Canada, 1953-55
Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Fellow, 1957-61
NSF Senior Postdoctoral Sabbatical Fellow (at Imperial College of Science & technology, London), 1963-64
Senior Editor of Journal of Organic Chemistry, 1965-71
NIH, Medicinal Chemistry Study Section, 1966-70
Elected Fellow of The New York Academy of Sciences, 1967
MD Sect. ACS, Alter. Councillor & Awards Committee, 1967-69
Panel for Postdoctorate Research Awards, N.R.C. (USA), 1968-69
J.B. Zinn Lecturer, Gettysburg College, 1968
Arapahoe Lecturer, University of Colorado, 1968
Frontiers in Chemistry Lecturer, Case Western Reserve University, 1970
Editorial Board ACS Monograph Series, 1971-72
NSF Senior Postdoctoral Sabbatical Fellow (at University of Munich, Germany), 1971-72
Timmie Lecturer, Emory University, 1974
Visiting professor, University of Western Ontario, 1974 (fall)
Maryland Section, ACS, Alternate Councilor, 1974-76
ACS National Awards Committee, 1974-76
Visiting Associate, ACS Comm. Professional Training, 1975-79
American Executive Editor, Tetrahedron, 1978-96
Spring term sabbatical, Harvard University; host, J. R. Knowles, 1979
Maryland Chemist Award, 1990