

Science Article

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Proctor Prentice

Ross 'the Dream Boss' puts PHS to the test during jovial last hurrah



Surprising Dr. Ross Prentice (left) at his Public Health Sciences Division reception is Dr. Vern Farewell, who worked under Prentice as a master's degree student at the University of Waterloo and as a biostatistician in PHS from 1977 to 1986. Farewell traveled from Cambridge, England, to attend. Photo by Lawrie Robertson

By MARITA GRAUBE

He may have been dubbed "Ross the Dream Boss" Prentice by a former staffer, but the stepping-down director of the Public Health Sciences Division drew nearly as many jovial jabs as accolades at a standing-room-only tribute last week.

A combination roast and reception, the event drew some 215 faculty and staff, who packed shoulder to shoulder in 927 Met East to hear the last hurrah from their 20-year division director.

And true to form, Prentice came fully prepared with tricks of his own. With a mischievous grin, he greeted the full room.

"Okay class. Welcome to the High Noon Catechism."

No stranger to jokes, he told the audience he wasn't kidding this time. He had whipped up a "compulsory" quiz, challenging the giggling audience to try for a perfect score on their answer sheets and threatening to discipline bad behavior with a few imaginary proctors.

"He's a real character," PHS Administrator Lawrie Robertson chuckled to his neighbor.

Divided into three sections, the early years (1972-1981), the entrepreneurial years (1982-1997), and the interdisciplinary years (1998-2002), the 40-question exam covered the history of the center, PHS and Prentice's career - work that continued after his Nov. 1 departure, with him staying on as a principal investigator for the Women's Health Initiative and in development of statistical methods.

A perfect score for Prentice's test was hard to come by. Most of questions were not as easy as the first one: identifying the first president and director of the center, Dr. Bill Hutchinson.

But if you knew what type of computer Prentice used in the mid-1970s or when the first endometrial cancer case-control studies took place, you may have fared better and avoided Prentice's recommendation for "remedial summer school."

PHS' persistence

During the quiz, Prentice reflected on his colleagues and the many projects they undertook. A continuing theme was the persistence of the PHS team despite hurdles such as lack of space and hints of federal-funding losses.

Yet these obstacles were viewed only as challenges, Prentice said. Given advice to consolidate rather than expand, "We listened," he said with a defiant laugh as he displayed a graph confirming the steady rise in PHS employment.

Keeping pace with Prentice's humor, several of those close to him chimed in with friendly banter. During the reception, Dr. Scott Davis, a fellow PHS investigator, came to the podium. He began to address the audience without the microphone and at an inaudible level. Within a few seconds of his muffled speech, the room exploded in an uproar of laughter, realizing that Davis was imitating Prentice's laid-back, soft-spoken style.

"I'll remember that!" warned Prentice with a grin and a shake of his finger.

The "Ross-roasting" jabs continued with a sample of his illegible handwritten notes, pictures of his younger days, sports highlights from his 1984 intramural football team, and anecdotes of his traveling bloopers.

Yet the roast was overshadowed by heaps of praise and respect from Prentice's colleagues. Georgia Thompson honored Prentice with the Donovan J. Thompson Excellence in Faculty Mentoring award. The award is named after her late husband, the founding head of the PHS Program in Epidemiology and Biostatistics, and honors faculty who have "demonstrated exemplary dedication to inspiring and mentoring young faculty."

Dr. Maureen Henderson, retired PHS investigator who ran the nation's first cancer-control research unit, commended Prentice as a "contemporary Victorian gentleman," describing his commitment, respectful demeanor and courtesy.

And Dr. Vern Farewell, who worked under Prentice as a master's degree student at the University of Waterloo and as a biostatistician in PHS from 1977 to 1986, journeyed all the way from Cambridge, England, to attend.

Aside from Prentice's vision and leadership, Dr. Robert Day, center president and director from 1981 to 1997 and a PHS investigator, detailed his early appraisal of Prentice as a superb mathematician and statistician.

"And furthermore," Day added, "he likes it!"

Several years ago, Day talked Prentice out of stepping down as PHS director.

"It was very gratifying to see that Ross had decided to stay on as long as he had," Day said. "In fact, I began to wonder if he'd ever stop!"

'Enemy' wisecracks

Prentice's successor, Dr. John Potter, called Dr. Mark Groudine to the podium. As head of Basic Sciences or the division that Prentice jokingly called "Enemy Territory," Groudine reflected on Prentice and threw in a few wisecracks.

"When I first met Ross, I certainly thought he was lame," he said. "Later, since he resigned so many times, I thought he was a lame duck. And now I guess he's just continuing his career as a duck."

Then Groudine presented Prentice with a painting of a duck in a doctor suit, captioned, "The Ducktor is In." The two later shook hands and bumped shoulders like two goofy teen-age boys.

"He's stepped down maybe three times already," joked Dr. Lee Hartwell, center president and director.

Hartwell, who described Prentice's passion for the center, also spoke of the biostatistician's enthusiasm for golf. With that, he handed Prentice a gift certificate to a golf store and a trip to Hawaii for a golf holiday.

In addition to Hawaii, Prentice also will enjoy traveling in 2003, when he ventures to New Zealand for a vacation with his wife, Didi.

Throughout the praise and the pokes, Prentice remained cheerful yet humble.

"I appreciate all the nice sentiments and wish I could live up to half of the nice comments you said about me," he said. "It's been truly remarkable, and for me I think the Hutch was a better fit than I could have found anywhere else in academia or with any other opportunity."

On the way out the door, attendees received an Official Ross Prentice Pencil. Marcea Kato, former PHS administrative manager, claimed that Prentice preferred pencils over pens for his illegible notes and spent several minutes every morning sharpening those #2s to facilitate his scrawled penmanship.

Prentice will be missed in PHS as he goes back to his primary research interests. Those who worked closely with him expressed great admiration, like Kato, who dubbed him "Ross the Dream Boss" and lauded his ethics.

"He's awesome," said Lawrie Robertson. "He's the best boss you could ever have."

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