

Obituary

It is with great sadness that the Executive Board of Wageningen UR announces the passing of Jack Leunissen, the former Editor-in-Chief of *In Silico Biology*. On behalf of his colleagues, I would like to share a few stories that bring to light Jack's passion and warmth and his pioneering spirit.

From 2002, Jack was professor of bioinformatics at Wageningen University. In the 1980s, he put his heart and soul into shaping his scientific domain nationally as well as internationally, always with a passion devoted to solving problems in molecular biology. It was very characteristic of Jack to be the first person in the Netherlands to claim the domain name bioinformatics.nl. From the beginning, he was personally acquainted with many of the people who developed the now reputed algorithms and databases. His interest was widespread, from evolutionary genealogical trees to automated text analysis. Despite his busy agenda as professor, Jack remained active in writing computer programs, his favorite hobby that easily complimented his work. In the early pioneering days, there were few rules and often involved building new software on an open laptop in the back of a bus while returning from a congress. Jack derived the most satisfaction from operating in this way.

Jack always kept a close eye on new developments. When a technology finally found broad application he would already be working on the next. One of Jack's favorite remarks, when someone came up with something new, was, "Oh, we were already doing that 10 years ago." He would then find a relevant book or thesis from his bookcase. Colleagues from other research disciplines did not always recognize the special role that Jack played in his scientific field – the fate of pioneering.

Jack's true passion lay in knowledge dissemination. He was a devoted and excellent lecturer. His enthusiasm and conviction inspired young generations of bioinformatics researchers and students all over the world. This was illustrated by the large number of international courses in which Jack was involved. The EPS course, "Bioinformatics: A User's Approach," which he gave with Dave Judge in Wageningen, was always fully booked in advance. From 1993, Jack taught the annual course in Trieste where he passed on the tricks of the bioinformatics trade to biologists. His wife and

children often accompanied him, which turned the event into their summer holiday. The local culinary culture became one of his research subjects.

While others might have conserved their energy by withdrawing from their work, this was not the case with Jack. While already ill last year, he continued to lecture in Wageningen and Trieste. This effort clearly was therapeutic for him.

In supervising PhD students, Jack left room for their own ideas and passions with full confidence in the abilities of his people. He mentored his students when necessary and discussed matters that he considered important; all else was irrelevant. One of his colleagues said recently that when thinking of Jack, he recalled that researchers and students from other groups who had problems sought help from Jack.

Jack gave of his time willingly and freely, which meant that there was little activity at the chair group before 10:00 a.m. It was not unusual to see him at work on a Sunday afternoon or answering e-mails at 3:00 a.m. Even in his last days, he found it important to show how proud he was of his group. In one instance, he apologized about difficulties in judging a doctoral thesis from Malaysia and asked for assurance that this matter would be handled appropriately. Jack was fully committed to his work; it made him feel good to continue working right up to the time that this was really no longer possible.

Jack's great passion and broad interest in bioinformatics led to the development of a colorful research group. Jack took great pride in this. In the years that I have been director of the Plant Sciences Group in Wageningen, Jack and I had many discussions about the further development of his scientific domain. His ideas will play an important part in increasing the significance of bioinformatics in the green life sciences in the future.

With his passion and his warmth, Jack Leunissen will remain a source of inspiration for many students and researchers in years to come.

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