

Rodney Nichols: a Rockefeller remembrance

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Our friend and colleague, Rodney Nichols, passed away on 1 September 2018, nearing the age of 81. Rod spent 20 years working for The Rockefeller University, from 1970 to 1990, and continued close association after that. Of all the institutions with which Rod associated, Rockefeller meant the most to him and benefited the most from his hard work, dedication, and capacity for enduring friendships. Hence, a Rockefeller remembrance.

The son of Clarence Nichols and Theda Wayson, Rodney Wayson Nichols was born on September 15th 1937 in Evanston, Illinois, where his father graduated from Northwestern University. Clarence Nichols joined the State Department in 1945 and rose to chief of the international resources division and other senior posts, from which he would retire in 1971. Interested in science and development, especially agriculture, early in his career he co-authored a report on viral diseases of peach and cherry crops. Clarence was a Son of the American Revolution. Rod and his younger brother George grew up mostly in Arlington, Virginia. Rod took to heart the 12 points of the Boy Scout Law: A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent. Rod became a state champion in tennis. He graduated in 1959 from Harvard College with a degree in applied physics.

For the next seven years Rod worked in northern Virginia for Melpar Inc., a subsidiary of Westinghouse Corporation. Melpar performed R&D for the Department of Defense and assembled products such as missile equipment, flight simulators, radar beacons, fuses, antennas, and electronic countermeasure and reconnaissance systems.

In 1966, at age 28, Rod joined the so-called Whiz Kids, a group of experts whom Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and his deputies brought into the Pentagon to modernize defense strategy with operations research, game theory, and computing, and to implement new management systems. Rod served for 5 years as a special assistant for research in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He worked especially closely with John (Johnny) Foster Jr., Director, Defense

Research and Engineering, a position then considered the number-three job in the Department of Defense.

Rod also worked closely with the Defense Science Board, chaired from 1964-1968 by Frederick Seitz, pioneer of low temperature physics and then-President of the US National Academy of Sciences (NAS). As Seitz completed his term as president of the NAS, he succeeded Detlev Bronk, another former President of the NAS, as President of The Rockefeller University in 1968, where he would serve until 1979. In 1970 Fred recruited Rod to Rockefeller, where Rod remained as Vice President and then Executive Vice President through the presidency of Joshua Lederberg, until 1990.

In 1984, to help part-time with some initiatives at Rockefeller, Josh and Rod recruited me, also from Washington, where I worked for the NAS and the National Science Foundation (NSF). Planes then shuttled cheaply every 30 minutes between New York and DC, no airport security slowed a person hurrying to the departure gate, and a taxi from LaGuardia sometimes took only 13 minutes. Frequently I traveled in less than 100 minutes from an office in DC to the RU campus or vice versa. Rod particularly liked that I was secretary of the Committee on International Science of the National Science Board, which governed the NSF. We started talking about roles of science in international diplomacy and never stopped.

Rockefeller colleagues from this era know Rod's son Christopher. Chris is an alumnus of the University's Children's School and frequently visited Rod on the 2nd floor of Caspary Hall during the 1980s. Chris is a historian of America, and no choice of career could have pleased his dad more. Chris and his wife Lily Sheehan are both professors at Oregon State University.

Rod's first wife and Christopher's mother was Carolyn McKnight, from whom Rod divorced in the late 1980s. Carolyn passed away in 2017. She retired as an editor at New American Library after a successful publishing career, shaping the growth of the romance genre. In 1985 she was quoted in the *Washington Post* saying "Gone are the days when the sweet, little trembling 18-year-old virgin in the typing pool got swept off her feet by the macho, conglomerate boss."

On a snowy April day in 1993, Rod re-married, Nancy Pyle, a vice president for international planning of the American University in Beirut. They had fallen in love as members together of a delegation touring research institutions in the Middle East. Nancy died in 2002 of complications of ALS. Rod's step-daughter Courtney Pyle Chilov remains a treasured legacy of Nancy.

Rod was luckiest with his third love, physician Karen Landau. Rod enjoyed ten very happy and adventurous years with Karen and her daughter Lily, of whom Rod was exceedingly fond. Karen and Lily, together with Chris and George, provided extraordinary comfort during Rod's accommodations to lymphoma.

Rod leaves many facets to recall -- a patriotic and proud American but also fascinated by China, India, and Iran; an advocate for building and sustaining strong universities and an effective public sector, but also for a tough capitalism as the best road to development; a skeptic about many health and environmental scares and always seeking more and better evidence; a writer who liked to dictate letters into an old tape machine, a Dictaphone, and an editor who would persist through 20 versions of a document; a lover of the US Open tennis tournament and the New York Mets; an eater of lean lunches who looked eternally young. Rod and John D. Rockefeller both believed in caloric restriction as a path to health before science did the experiments.

Importantly, Rod was an astute matchmaker of people and jobs, and of people with other people. He sustained large social networks. He had many friends – including Fred and Betty Seitz and Josh Lederberg and his family. Other friends in the Rockefeller community included Alick Bearn, Gunter Bloebel, Zan Cohn, Dave Luck, Dave Lyons, Lila Magee, Bruce Merrifield, Ralph Steinman, and Norton Zinder.

I close with a note about science advice. In 1972 Rod authored an article for the magazine *Minerva* entitled “Some practical problems of scientist-advisers.” Almost to the day he passed away, Rod continued in that role. During his life he contributed to every major American institution that sought to improve use of expertise in government: the National Academies, Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, Council on Foreign Relations, Carnegie Commission on Science, Technology, and Government, New York Academy of Sciences, and Manhattan Institute, to name a few. He advised the White House, National

Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, UN agencies, and the Sloan and Simons foundations. Perhaps because of his father, Rod was especially committed to boosting the capacities of the US Department of State and the US Agency for International Development.

Here are some abbreviated lines from the opening paragraph of his 1972 essay: *In the past 10 years, the lot of the part-time scientist-adviser has changed drastically. During the early 1960s there was...wide public belief in the need for and beneficence of technology for defense and other national goals, and virtually unqualified trust in the statesmen of the scientific community. Scientist-advisers to government were heroic figures. Today...publicists, civic leaders and politicians ... are inclined to believe that expert opinion on any major issue is disputable by other experts. As a result, the public is often confused, and scientist-advisers have been placed in increasingly difficult and complicated situations.*

Rod loved the difficult, complicated situations and never ceased to approach them with an almost naïve American optimism and purity of intent. He was an Eagle Scout of American science: *Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient* (usually), *Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent.*

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