MEMORIAL RESOLUTION
CARL DJerASSI
1923-2015

Carl Djerassi, Professor Emeritus of Chemistry, novelist, playwright, patron of the arts and pioneer in the production of the oral contraceptive pill, died in his home in San Francisco on January 30. He was 91 years old.

Djerassi was born in Vienna in 1923 to Samuel Djerassi and Alice Friedmann. He lived for periods in Sofia, Bulgaria and Vienna but with the rising Nazi threat, moved with his mother to the United States, arriving nearly penniless in 1939.

Djerassi graduated at the age of 18 from Kenyon College where in his own words, he “became a chemist”. He earned a Ph.D. in chemistry from Wisconsin in 1945 and subsequently worked at CIBA, developing one of the first commercial antihistamines (Pyribenzamine). In 1949, Djerassi became associate director of research at Syntex in Mexico City. His research on steroids led to the synthesis of norethisterone and the first birth-control pill, studies that have since transformed science and society.

Djerassi joined the faculty at Wayne State University in 1952. In 1959, he joined the faculty at Stanford while for a time serving also as president of Syntex Research. In 1968, he founded Zoecon, a company directed at hormonal control of insect pests.

Djerassi published over 1200 scientific manuscripts, encompassing seminal contributions to tools for structure elucidation including mass spectrometry, magnetic circular dichroism and optical rotatory dispersion. He also made pioneering contributions to our understanding of the biosynthesis of marine natural products. With Nobel Laureate Joshua Lederberg and computer scientist Edward Feigenbaum, he also devised a computer program called DENDRAL, one of the earliest uses of artificial intelligence for structure elucidation. Djerassi was an inspiring educator and mentor, as well as a strong advocate of women in science.

Djerassi was recognized with numerous awards including the National Medal of Science (1973), the National Medal of Technology (1991), and the Priestly Medal (1992) – the highest honor awarded by the American Chemical Society. He was inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame (1978). Amongst other recognitions, he spoke fondly about the Austrian Post Office issuing a stamp in his honor in 2005.

He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Medicine, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, as well as the Royal Society (London), the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences, the Academia Europaeae, and the German (Leopoldina), Mexican, Bulgarian, and Brazilian Academies of Sciences. He was the recipient of 32 honorary doctorates.
In the 1980s, Djerassi left his life as a scientist to pursue writing, poetry and playwriting. He turned initially to short stories, poetry and “science-in-fiction,” showing the human side of scientists and the personal conflicts they face in their quest for knowledge, recognition, and financial rewards. He published numerous poems, short stories, novels, autobiographies, poetry and essay collections, and a memoir (This Man’s Pill: Reflections on the 50th birthday of the Pill). Since 1997, he has focused on play-writing, initially in the genre of “science-in-theatre” including “Calculus”, “Oxygen”, “Phallacy”, “Taboos”, “Ego”, “Three on a Couch”, “Insufficiency”, and “Foreplay”, plays performed in countries around the world.

He is survived by his son Dale (from his marriage to Norma Lundholm); a stepdaughter, Leah Middlebrook (from his marriage in 1985 to Diane Middlebrook, a Stanford Professor); and grandson, Alexander Djerassi, whom Djerassi considered the “family masterpiece”. His daughter Pamela, a poet and artist, died in 1978. The Djerassi Artists Residency Program was founded in her memory. Djerassi and Diane Middlebrook shared their love of literature and the arts on the Djerassi ranch and homes in San Francisco and London until her death in 2007. Djerassi was a patron of the arts and donated his vast Paul Klee collection to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Albertina in Vienna.

Committee

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