The quiet collaborator

Radhamany Sooryamoorthy pays tribute to the humanity and the immense contribution of his colleague, Durban scientist Patricia Berjak

O N MONDAY morning, January 20, I was having my regular session on my treadmill walker and read ing The Mercury. On the second page at the left-hand corner there was a brief news item and a small photograph of Patricia Berjak, a renowned seed scientist.

Pat, as she was affectionately called, is with us no more. She passed away unexpectedly. Death is always like that. It hits at very inopportune times, without any sense. I wouldn't say that I was shocked to read the news. I paused for a while, thought about her, and then attempted to move on in my book page. But I could not. I was dragged back to the report on her, finding it difficult to concentrate on the rest of the newspaper, which I normally finish by the end of my walk.

Who was Pat? A great scientist of high international repute? Yes. An erudite scholar dedicated to the study of seeds and who thereby worked for the well-being of humanity? No doubt about that. A committed professor on and off campus. A passionate human being who found fulfillment in life outside the world of hard-core research, and certainly, Pat had a multidimensional personality, which is uncommon among scientists. For many, their sole mission is to do scientific research, and the expense of other important things in life.

Pat loved her research, her collaborators, her students and her life. She held strong views on science and worked incessantly towards realizing those views. She was witty and without much fanfare.

September 17, 2003. That was a beautifully sunny day. A day not just a counter with Pat happened that day. After having had some mediated communication, I finally got to see her. I sat down in front of her in her small office in the red brick Centre for Agricultural Medicine at the Howard College campus of what was then the University of Natal. Pat greeted me with a smile. She was busy with the interview she was going to write for a scheduled interview. I thanked her for making the time to talk to me. Pat was a strong believer in collaboration and for her "it enriches what one is doing and what the other is doing. It is mutually beneficial!" She remembered how collaboration with the developed world assisted her in accessing modern technology for her research. Not only with international partners, Pat worked also with national and local partners, gaining intellectual stimulation in her work.

She was a team player, and worked very well with her colleagues, students and, of course, with her husband, Norman Pammenter. A very simple, unassuming and modest person, Pat always gave due respect to people who worked with her and was very supportive to her students and junior academics.

This simplicity was evident, even in the way she walked with a slanting shoulder, and in her approach to people. This is not very common among hard-core scientists, who live in their own isolated worlds of materials and equipment. I remember her sober face, while receiving the Order of Mapungubwe in silver from Thabo Mbeki, the then president of the country. This quality of Pat is reflected in all her activities, but most notably in her professional ones. Students and colleagues often spoke about the kind and gentle way she had treated them. To them, Pat was a great scientist who did not hold back words around and treated them with respect and dignity. They were all part of a family as one of her students and collaborators reminisced.

And so in 2007 I contacted her with a difficult request. After having had the chance to study hundreds of scientists and their research, I thought of making a research film. I considered Pat to be a perfect subject for the central character of the film. She was a bit hesitant initially, but consented to the idea, and made herself available to my friend Geoff Waters, and helping the equipment, we met with her on February 20, 2007 for our first day of shooting. Geoff was Pat's right hand while I handled the equipment for filming, beginning in various locations on the campus. Pat was open and had a lot of fun about a whole lot of broader issues.

As for the significance of climate change in her research, Pat believed it was enormous. She said, "As climate changes you will need planting stock to deal with new environments that aren't in the same geographic positions, and have totally changed.

"I think that the impact of climate change is underestimated by most people.

"Scientist Patricia Berjak, Zululand Times, 30 January 2007"

In concluding the filmed interview, we asked her if she would fire, and what would she do. The answer was a smile and that she paused for a moment to say this:

"Look, let me put it this way. As long as we feel we are really having an impact with the research and we are really doing well...we've got the funding. We are stuck until one day when we are not being funded. And one day when we are not being funded.

"As the climate becomes more dry from the west to the east (in South Africa) it is not going to affect us much here (in KZN), as the mountains are going to be the barrier. But a lot of the other parts of the country to the east, we are going to get an increasing desertification and aridity in the eastern Cape province.

"So we have to have materials that presently are suitable for the extreme environments that are planted in the central regions. So it's very significant for us.

But then thought that organic farming was something hipped up beyond its value. In her own words, "organic farming is a little too curious funny. I can't be present. Now, you might say, 'Well, so what?' The funny actuality, of course, is that there is quite a lot of organic substances which are part of our own metabolism. But these toxic substances are very toxic, actually carcinogenic. So, it's a trade-off. Either the seed-associated fungi, or fungicidal treatments. In a lot of ways, certain health foods are certainly not healthy...the whole story is not there, is not visible.

"Organic farming...well...sure you don't particularly want to eat things with pesticides and stuff, and on the other hand we have a food counterbalance, you know, what is best, and I must admit I do not certainly go for organic vegetables. I do not."

Pat explained herself as an intuitive, enthusiastic and a determined person, the essential qualities of a scientist. A very innovative and rigorous life, at least I had maintained an active social life, and Norman loved cars. They danced and enjoyed the presence of the ballroom, flew aeroplanes, and certainly built bridges.

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