Memorial Minute for Elizabeth Ann Tyrrell Rajam, December 15, 2021, Faculty Meeting

Written by Stylianos P Scordilis with extensive help from colleagues and students and Read by Stylianos P Scordilis, Biological Sciences Department, Smith College

I begin by thanking both retired and current colleagues for their reminiscences, but especially thank former students who captured other vital perspectives on a remarkable teacher and mentor.

Elizabeth Ann Tyrell Rajam died this past July at age 89. Liz, as she preferred to be called, was born in Pittsfield MA, earned her Bachelor of Science degree in biology from Simmons College and after two years working in industry at Parke, Davis and Company, furthered her education at the University of Michigan with both a Master of Science and a PhD in bacteriology. She joined the Department of Bacteriology and Public Health at Smith in 1960 as an Instructor and rose through the ranks to Professor in the Department of Biological Sciences in 1979.

Liz mentored generations of Smith students in microbiology. Her courses, whether for majors or non-majors, were rigorous explications about working with living infectious organisms, providing a literacy that is critical not only to the laboratory, but to society at large. Students in her Bacteriology and Virology laboratory courses learned a systematic way to set up their lab benches that optimized efficiency and order, lessons that served them well regardless of their future pursuits. She taught general bacteriology while Betty Robinton taught pathogenic bacteriology which included working with tuberculosis at the bench! How times have changed. When she taught starting students sterile techniques, she would correct them for not following established protocol by saying “If you did that in Ms Robinton’s class, you would be dead now”. With such an admonishment I am certain that the correction was remembered. Liz’s courses were highly collaborative endeavors. Working in pairs or as a member of a laboratory team, her students learned the value of communicating ideas and sharing the responsibility for their safety, results and conclusions.

Although the lessons Liz taught were serious ones about health and safety, working with her was also a lot of fun. A child of the Great Depression, she was renowned amongst her students and colleagues for her frugal ways of reusing aluminum foil in the microbiology preparation room, while also joking that she hoped the College would one day establish a fund for absorbent paper

towels. Her humor and dry wit were ever present, along with her welcoming demeanor. She was on sabbatical the semester I interviewed in the Department. My first week here Jeanne Powell was showing me her mouse colony and we were taking the elevator from the basement to the third floor of Sabin-Reed. The door opened on the first floor and Liz walked in, introducing herself as the "Wicked Witch of the fourth floor"! Needless to say, this took me aback. Another introduction to new faculty members was "Welcome to the loony bin". She chaired the Department for three terms, so she knew of what she spoke. Liz accepted all of us with her award-winning patience. For our new microbiologist, she left a Smith mug with a bottle of Tylenol next to it and a note stating, "You will need this". Liz also left some trinkets on her desk amongst which was a devil trinket. When you push it down, a sign pops out of its head that says, "Go to Hell". These exemplify her wonderful "tell it like it is" personality.

To visit her office meant being treated to a cup of tea, a kind ear, and an open heart. Alongside many journals and books, a corner in the office contained photos of her beloved dog Joseph and images of the bucolic Westhampton farmhouse that she shared with her husband and fellow bacteriologist P.C. Rajam, known to the Department as Raj. She surprised her colleagues when she returned from a sabbatical at the Boston University School of Medicine married to Raj, the head of the lab in which she was working!

Liz's research focused on exploring the unusual phenomenon of autolysis in the well-known pathogenic bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. *Listeria* required particular skill and caution. The microbiology laboratory across the hall from her office, had been designed at her recommendation with special air handling and filtration, so as to avoid potential contamination of other spaces in the building. Her students often remarked how well prepared they were for future study and work after Ms Tyrrell's courses at Smith. Much of Liz's research was done in collaboration with her husband. She maintained a cot in the small laboratory behind her office where Raj, who was then suffering from cancer, would rest during the long growth curve experiments they conducted together. His loss was not only that of her collaborator, but also of the love of her life.

At her retirement dinner in 1997, a former student who was the Medical Director of the Joslin Center for Diabetes at the State University of New York College of Medicine, sent a letter stating and I quote “It was through her microbiology courses, and particularly under her direction, that I was taught critical thinking and gained motivation to aspire to a career in academic medicine”. This was a common sentiment from her students.

In remembering Elizabeth Ann Tyrrell Rajam, Liz, we learned much from her, admired her wisdom, and greatly appreciated her wit and humor and we reflect fondly on her dedicated teaching and mentoring through which she provided generations of Smith students and faculty colleagues alike with a keen awareness and understanding of the unseen world in our midst.

Thank you.