



John Matthew McDowell

April 30, 1965 - December 24, 2024

John Matthew McDowell passed away peacefully Tuesday, Dec. 24, while surrounded by family after a 19-month battle with cancer. He was 59 and spent the past 24 years as a renowned professor in the school of plant and environmental sciences at Virginia Tech.

He spent his entire life improving lives around him as a devoted son, brother, husband, professor, friend and father. From his wife, sons, to his coworkers, college roommates, family and countless others, everyone has a story about John that evokes smiles and laughter.

John was a serious man when he needed to be. He took a measured, insightful and detail-oriented approach to life that commanded respect.

That did not stop him from having plenty of fun in his time away from the lab. One time, he drove a golf cart through a collection of lawn chairs after celebrating a wedding between close friends.

Decades later, he spoke in front of the U.S. Congress advocating for scientific research funding. John loved his work and poured his life into it but also found plenty of time to make sure those around him felt extremely loved.

He was equally happy to spend a day at work researching, outside riding his

mountain bike or on the living room couch watching college football for 10 hours with his son. Everyone who spent time with him in any of those settings left cherishing those experiences.

Born in Knoxville, Tennessee, April 30th, 1965, his childhood was filled with a love for reading, camping, and a budding curiosity for the natural world. He enrolled at the University of Tennessee in 1983, majoring in forestry after arriving at the school as an Eagle Scout. An issue of Time Magazine ignited his passion for plant genetics, and he built a career from there.

John has been published in 39 scientific journals since 2010. He holds a PhD from the University of Georgia and worked at Virginia Tech for more than 20 years, joining the university in 2000. During that time, he built friendships and a family while piling up professional awards and recognition— including a Certificate of Teaching Excellence from the Hokies' College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

He taught graduate-level classes and was appointed by the university as the J.B. Stroobants Professor of Biotechnology. John's contributions to the scientific community, both personally and professionally, are highly regarded all over the world.

John married Cathy McDowell June 3, 1995, in the backyard of his childhood home. They enjoyed 29 years of loving marriage that included a road trip to the United States Southwest as their honeymoon. John loved to travel and found the perfect partner for that in Cathy. He was frugal in some areas but not when it came to exploring the world.

They took anniversary trips to Paris and Greece and traveled with their sons— Ethan and Jonah— all over America. He loved camping and took annual vacations to Western North Carolina to mountain bike and he spent time at ski

resorts throughout the country with his family and friends from college.

On one of those camping expeditions, John and Jim Major— who have known each other since their freshman year at Tennessee— found themselves deep in the woods on a mountain bike ride when a thunderstorm erupted, causing trees to fall around them. Jim asked if they should wait out the storm.

“A moving target is harder to hit,” John replied with a smile before taking off down the trail.

He remained positive even in tough circumstances— an attitude that his friends and family admired and could not help adopt themselves. Throughout his life, he was persistent and even stubborn at times. Lightning struck him three times while rock climbing, but he stuck with one of his favorite hobbies. John broke his arm on the first day of a weeklong skiing trip but kept carving up the powder until his wife made him stop once she found out about the injury later that day.

Adversity, big and small, never rattled him. His cancer diagnosis did not shake him from his unwavering dedication to those around him, his career and his hobbies.

He did not hesitate to tell people he loved them and also showed that in his actions. There was never any doubt that he cared deeply about those who cared about him.

John is survived by his beloved wife, Cathy, of Blacksburg; his sons, Jonah of Washington, D.C., and Ethan of Raleigh, North Carolina; his mother, Martha Jane, of Blacksburg; and his sisters, Susan and Mary, of Austin, Texas.

In lieu of flowers, the family kindly requests that donations be made in his memory to the Poverty Creek Trails Coalition (<https://www.povertycreektrails.org/donate>) and The Preston Robert Tisch Brain Tumor Center. (<https://tischbraintumorcenter.duke.edu/>) The family is planning a celebration of life for spring 2025.

Tribute Wall

FG

“ *John remains in our hearts and lives on in our memories.*

At the recent 2025 Oomycete Molecular Genetics Network (OMGN) meeting held in Cologne, Germany, on July 12, the organizers commemorated John's commitment to OMGN. John was an esteemed member of the oomycete research community and a passionate advocate for advancing our understanding of plant-pathogen interactions. I have known John for more than twenty years. We met at OMGN and MPMI meetings, and also at the retreats of the oomycete CAP project with John as one the leading PI's. From 2016 to 2022 John and I served as co-chairs of the OMGN Steering Committee. John was such a kind and inspiring person. We always had very nice conversations and it was a privilege to have John on board.

The photo was taken in 2019 in Scotland on the day off between the OMGN meeting in Oban and the MPMI meeting in Glasgow, when we were hiking with colleagues in the highlands.

Rest in peace, John!

Francine Govers



Francine Govers - August 12, 2025 at 10:45 AM

JC

“ I am deeply saddened to hear this. I was in school with John in Alcoa, TN and was in the Boy Scouts with him as well. John was always happiest in the outdoors. He was an avid conservationist and left every campsite better than he found it. He was definitely a gentle soul and was always kind to everyone.

Joe Cobb - May 04, 2025 at 01:01 AM

“ Dear McDowell family,

I am deeply sorry for your loss. I had the honor of being a graduate student in the McDowell lab from 2015 to 2021. During that time, John was someone I saw more often than even my own family. He became one of the most inspiring figures in my life, and his influence continues to guide me.

The photo on the cover was taken at 6 p.m. on April 20, 2017, at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. That day, John brought our entire class on a field trip to Washington, D.C., to meet with the FDA and USDA. After the visits, we spent time at the museum. I was lucky to capture a moment of John looking thoughtfully at the plants—full of curiosity and passion on nature, which reflects a lot who he was.

One memory that stands out is a conversation we had after class while walking back to Latham Hall. He asked me, “How would you explain your research to your family?” I answered with technical terms and polished language, trying to sound professional. Then he gently asked, “Do you think your grandmother would understand your research?” At the time, I didn’t quite understand why it mattered if my grandmother understood or not. But a couple of days later, while pipetting in the lab, it suddenly clicked: science isn’t just about beautiful data or fancy words—it’s also about communication, about making your work accessible to everyone. That was John’s way—he had a thoughtful way of guiding you to your own understanding instead of imposing his thoughts on you.

He was also caring in ways not only in academics. Once, I twisted my ankle from climbing but didn’t think much of it and I was hopping around like nothing had happened. John noticed and told me I should take it seriously if I wanted to stay active in the long run—he even recommended a physical therapist. That was also the first time I learned he was a climber himself. It helped me see him from a new angle—not just as a professor or advisor, but also as a fellow

climber and a friend.

There are so many memories like these—small but meaningful moments that shaped who I am today. I feel incredibly fortunate to have had John as my advisor. His kindness, curiosity, and wisdom left a lasting impact on my life.

With heartfelt sympathy,

Wei Wang and Kevin Yu



Wei Wang - April 25, 2025 at 10:42 PM

BK

“ *Very sad to hear of John's passing. John was a roommate in college back in Athens GA and we shared many adventures together. We both rock climbed and mountain biked and had a shared love of the wilderness. Some of my most memorable trips with him included: Climbing 'the daddy' in Linville Gorge, a 6 pitch climb in NC. Other great trips included Looking Glass, NC, The 'Gunks' in NY and New River Gorge in WV. . I always felt safe lead climbing with John at the belay, I new he had my back and he always offered encouragement in challenging moments. We both started mountain biking around the same time and combined some of our climbing trips with mnt. biking and had many fun local rides.*

John was devoted to his family and work and was a lot of fun to hang out with. He was one of the great ones and he will be missed but not forgotten. I hope to re-connect with him in the great gig in the sky one day. Rest in peace my friend and much love to family and friends that new and loved him!

- Bruce Kehr

Bruce Kehr - March 07, 2025 at 01:34 PM

BK

“ *1 file added to the tribute wall*



Bruce Kehr - March 07, 2025 at 12:36 PM

BK

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Bruce Kehr - March 07, 2025 at 12:35 PM

BK

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Bruce Kehr - March 07, 2025 at 12:33 PM

NF

“ I'm so sad to hear of John's passing. I was one of the first undergraduate researchers in his lab at VT and spent 3 fantastic years working with him and learning how to do science. His curiosity, dedication to asking important questions, and commitment to his students convinced me that I'd much rather go to PhD school (and become a professor like John) than MD school as I had originally planned. One particularly beautiful day in Blacksburg, I decided to play hooky from the lab and go for a hike. Who comes paddling up the river in his kayak at the exact moment the trail dipped towards the banks? "Busted!" he called out to me with a huge smile on his face.

I hadn't talked with John over the past couple years, but I think of him often when I'm in my lab, or teaching class, or trying to serve as a mentor for my students. John had a profound impact on my life and I am grateful to have known him.

My condolences to his family and friends.

Nick Funderburg

Nicholas Funderburg - February 28, 2025 at 01:23 PM

SS

“ As a long-time CALS colleague of John, I had the opportunity to see him rise through the faculty ranks and take on increasing responsibilities at VT. He was always a generous person with a gentile disposition that I really admired. I respected him greatly and was very sad to hear of his passing when it was announced, as I had no idea he was ill. My thoughts are with John's family and close friends.

Scott Salom - February 27, 2025 at 08:56 AM

CM

“ *John McDowell
Celebration of Life
Saturday Apr 26, 2025, 1-4p
Hahn Horticultural Gardens at Virginia Tech*

Plus:

*Golf Scramble
Fri, Apr 25, 3p*

*Mountain Bike Ride
Sun, Apr 27, 9a*

More details to follow.

John would say good times equal a good send off! So plan for delicious food and a lot of laughter, and start getting your stories ready.

Cathy McDowell - January 29, 2025 at 04:38 PM

MW

Will there be fireworks? (Tee-he-he)

Mark Williams - March 07, 2025 at 12:57 PM

JH

“ *I've had the pleasure to meet John a couple of times on international congresses. I can still recall the nice chats we had about shared interests in work related topics, but above all our shared love for the outdoors. I'm so sad to hear about his passing. My condolences to John's family and friends.*

Johan van den Hoogen - January 29, 2025 at 07:07 AM



“ Arrive in Style was purchased for the family of John Matthew McDowell.



January 28, 2025 at 02:24 PM



“ Devdutta D. planted a grove of 3 [Memorial Trees](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of John Matthew McDowell.

Devdutta D. - January 28, 2025 at 02:06 PM

MM

“ Please save the date for John's Celebration of Life.

*John McDowell
Celebration of Life
Saturday Apr 26, 2025, 1-4p
Hahn Horticultural Gardens at Virginia Tech*

Plus:

*Golf Scramble
Fri, Apr 25, 3p*

*Mountain Bike Ride
Sun, Apr 27, 9a*

More details to follow.

John would say good times equal a good send off! So plan for delicious food and a lot of laughter, and start getting your stories ready.

Mary McDowell - January 26, 2025 at 09:11 AM

MW

Will there be fireworks? (Tee-he-he)

Mark Williams - March 07, 2025 at 12:57 PM

AA

“ *Dr. McDowell was one of my favorite Professors when I was in grad school at VT. I am a human biologist and Dr. McDowell's passion for molecular biology made me almost interested in plant genetics because of his enthusiasm. He was an amazing educator! Angela Anderson (Collegiate Associate Professor, HNFE, VT)*

Angela Anderson - January 18, 2025 at 02:24 PM

MC

“ I came to know John through his work with the Fralin Institute. He took on supervision of an ongoing research partnership project with the 10th grade students of the Blue Ridge Virginia Governor's School (for which I served as Director) several years ago. He was a real joy to work with - always positive, fun, friendly and incredibly supportive of our students - and it was with great sadness that I learned of his passing. He will be sincerely missed by the BRVGS community, and his family will be in our thoughts and prayers. Many thanks and fair winds, John.

Marc Carraway - January 17, 2025 at 01:47 PM



“ A [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) was planted in honor of John Matthew McDowell.

January 16, 2025 at 10:33 PM

KD

“ I have had the honor and pleasure of working with John through his allowing our high school students in the Blue Ridge Virginia Governor's school partner to do novel research. The experience he has helped provide this young group of future scientists is invaluable, amazing, and further supports what a selfless, truly awesome man John was. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. You ARE a rarity, and I hope someone picks up the torch with the level of passion you showed us. It has been a privilege to be part of his journey.

Kirsten Dexter - January 16, 2025 at 07:27 PM

KD

I would add on a more amusing note....the first time I met him, I thought of Ringo Starr,

kirsten dexter - January 16, 2025 at 08:36 PM

AG

“ I am so sad to hear of John's passing. I met John when he was a postdoc and I was a graduate student at Chapel Hill. It was always great to talk to him and never failed to have some laughs and leave with a smile. He was very generous, giving good advice on science and the practical aspects of navigating graduate school. And when my major professor lost all his grants, John was also generous in giving me reagents I needed from the Dangl lab (sorry, Jeff!).

I was really excited to have reunited with John and started new collaborations on chestnut blight this fall. I am so glad that I was able to chat with him, have some laughs, and look forward to our future endeavors.

You are appreciated and missed by so many, John.

Andrew Groover - January 15, 2025 at 01:53 PM

JH

“ Thank you John for your support and belief in me as my mentor and advisor. You always pushed me, not only to be better but to pursue my passions. You knew how to live life well and you still inspire me every day.

John Herlihy - January 15, 2025 at 12:41 PM

DT

“ Danielle T. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of John Matthew McDowell.

Danielle T. - January 14, 2025 at 08:15 AM

PJ

“ Pamela J. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of John Matthew McDowell.

Pamela J. - January 11, 2025 at 02:31 PM

GC

“ I met John through Jeff Dangl and Sarah Grant. When I became co-editor-in-chief of PLOS Genetics we desperately needed an editor on the board who was an expert in plant pathogen interactions - John was kind enough to accept our invitation. His insight, thoughtful editorial touch, and most importantly kindness, soon earned him a reputation as an excellent editor and as a result our volume of submissions in his area dramatically increased. Despite this he never complained about the workload and always delivered the same high-quality guidance for our authors. It wasn't until he left our board to take up his post as editor-in-chief at MPMI that we fully appreciated how much he had brought to our young journal and how hard it would be to replace him. I will treasure the memories of the countless conversations, which often side-tracked into mini-discussions about things like music, I had with John.

Greg Copenhaver - January 06, 2025 at 04:44 PM

AR

“ I am shocked and saddened to hear of John's passing. I worked with him on an Oomycete CAP project a decade ago now. I loved working with him - he was an awesome scientist and so humble. I appreciated the insights he shared and how he took the time to "dumb down" molecular research to those of us less involved in molecular research, without making us feel dumb! I remember how he loved to ride his bike and we would visit about bike rides he had done. Even after our project ended, I remember always being thrilled to see him at meetings. You know what they say - "Only the good die young", and he was truly one of the good! Sincere condolences to his family. Fly high John - you will be remembered fondly.

Alison Robertson - January 06, 2025 at 10:48 AM

PK

“ It is with profound sadness that we mourn the loss of John McDowell, a brilliant scientist and cherished colleague whose contributions to our field and broader community have left an enduring legacy. John’s open and collaborative spirit was truly remarkable. His dedication to fostering a culture of intellectual curiosity and teamwork was evident in every conversation and interaction we shared.

For years, we eagerly anticipated hosting John in Kentucky. Unfortunately, his demanding schedule and the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic prevented that visit from happening. Beyond science, we had hoped to share with him Kentucky’s finest bourbon beer. His absence is all the more poignant, leaving us with a bittersweet sense of what could have been.

John’s legacy endures in the groundbreaking ideas he nurtured and the countless researchers he inspired. Rest in peace, John. You will always be remembered.

Aadra and Pradeep

Pradeep Kachroo - January 04, 2025 at 12:38 AM

MK

“ Dr. John McDowell was an invaluable member of my dissertation committee during my time at Virginia Tech. I had the privilege of brainstorming with him and learning from his vast knowledge and insightful perspectives. A brilliant intellectual and a constant source of positivity, he brought both depth and encouragement to every interaction. His guidance and support were instrumental in shaping my academic journey. I am deeply saddened by his passing and extend my heartfelt condolences to his family. He will be fondly remembered by his colleagues, students, and all who had the honor of working with him.

Merve Kiremit - January 03, 2025 at 02:13 PM

LM

“ Dear McDoWell family, a respect colleague always admire John's work and a friend always encourage by John's kindness, I am so sorry to hear John's passing. I feel your loss and send you love. John will be deeply missed. Li-Jun

Li-Jun Ma - January 03, 2025 at 10:31 AM

LM

“ Li-Jun Ma planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of John Matthew McDowell.

Li-Jun Ma - January 03, 2025 at 10:29 AM



“ A [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) was planted in honor of John Matthew McDowell.

January 03, 2025 at 09:43 AM

JG

“ Jerry and Deborah Grider planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of John Matthew McDowell.

Jerry and Deborah Grider - January 03, 2025 at 09:30 AM

JG

“ Jerry and Deborah Grider purchased the Beautiful in Blue for the family of John Matthew McDowell.



Jerry and Deborah Grider - January 03, 2025 at 09:30 AM



“ Ghirardelli Galore Gift Tin was purchased for the family of John Matthew McDowell.



January 02, 2025 at 12:50 PM



“ It has been quite unbelievable and really sad to hear about John's passing. Over the last three years, I have had the opportunity to work with John on an NSF project he was leading with such great passion and vision. Those were years filled with moments which I will always treasure-meetings with John and Mahmut Tor, our collaborator from the UK, during which John's energy and positivity were always such a source of inspiration.

John was so much more than an exceptional scientist; he was a kind and humble soul who made every person feel valued and heard. His love for science and life was contagious, and his ability to make people come together was such a gift that every interaction with him was a pure joy.

Sherif M. Sherif - January 02, 2025 at 12:43 PM



“ Chuanxue H. planted a grove of 5 [Memorial Trees](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of John Matthew McDowell.

Chuanxue H. - January 02, 2025 at 09:17 AM

RG

“ *I was John's colleague, albeit at a distance. His exuberant energy and uncompromising intelligence did our department, and his discipline, proud. No silly politics, and such a great sense of humor! Virginia Tech, and our little corner of it, should be grateful to have had such a person as our colleague. I am so saddened to hear of his death. My condolences to his loving family. Ruth Grene*

Ruth Grene - December 31, 2024 at 08:01 PM

NG

“ I am saddened to hear of John’s untimely passing. I have a hard time digesting this news that I got while on vacation a few days ago. John was such a warm, friendly and creative person. He was the kind of guy you want to have on your team no matter what happens.

John led the journal *Molecular Plant-Microbe Interactions* (MPMI) as editor-in-chief from 2016-18. Although I had met him before, I got to know him better through my work with the APS Publications board and John served on a journal’s taskforce I chaired. I remember him fondly as being a fountain of new ideas, eager to mentor and support all members of the plant pathology community, and fun to hang out with in the evening over a good beer.

We were lucky to host John as a seminar speaker in Corvallis on November 8, 2018 (see photo). John was involved in some of the most seminal functional genetic discoveries of *Phytophthora* biology. In the photo, he was talking about the discovery of the RxLR effector genes that he contributed to.

I also learned a lot from John when I helped out at NIFA on the joint NSF-NIFA PBI grant program that John led as an NSF rotator. John mentored me on how this system works. Thanks John!

I love the picture of John that Cathy shared. That about sums him up!

I send my sincere condolences to Cathy and their family.



Nik Grunwald - December 31, 2024 at 07:36 PM

CM

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Cathy McDowell - December 31, 2024 at 05:24 PM

MW

I remember playing with those models. This had to be when he was taking Bob Ivarie's Molecular Genetics class at UGA.

Mark Williams - March 07, 2025 at 05:44 PM

BG

I was a grad student at UGA in Genetics Dept with John. This picture is exactly how I remember him. A brilliant student and a Dude of the highest caliber. It's very sad to learn of his passing

Bob Gregerson - June 11, 2025 at 10:48 AM

JD

“ I have had a rough week since learning of John's passing. He, and Cathy, are very special people for Sarah and I. Reading these tributes reinforces yet also thankfully diminishes my grief--John was an exceptionally positive force to a large number of people, and his legacy continues to shine in each of them. I first met John when he was a shaggy haired ski bum mountain biking grad student in Rich Meagher's lab at UGa. We met at a Keystone conference in Taos. I was wearing a Grateful Dead sweatshirt and John introduced himself as a fellow traveler.

He was interested in joining my lab, which was moving from Cologne, Germany to UNC in 18 months time. We began our long friendship on the spot. John was infectious--serious but unrestrained, clearly passionate about science, but full of other interests. Just the kind of person we like to have in our lab. We began and long conversation by telefax (no email back then) and discussed lots of possible projects. At the time, Eric Holub, Jim Beynon, Ian Crute and we were trying to isolate plant disease resistance genes against downy mildew from Arabidopsis. This was before any such genes were cloned and our discussions as to what they might encode and how they might function were wide ranging. What I learned from his telefaxes was that John was an excellent writer and a thinker of crystalline clarity. So John wrote and was awarded a USDA Post-doctoral fellowship and joined our lab just after we arrived in Chapel Hill in the summer of 1995. He knocked on my office door as I was in the middle of some frustrating task and said hi. I looked up and said, 'I'm sorry, but who are you'. He had shaved his long curly hair and was now the adult Dr. McDowell shown in the photos on this memorial. I hope someone posts a 'before' photo.

John and Murali in the lab cloned RPP8 and figured out how it evolved via unequal crossing over, a first at the time. John was a lab leader for his entire tenure in my lab. He always had ideas to share about his and everyone else's project. His enthusiasm was infectious. He wanted very much to drive oomycete research

forward and did so over his career, through his research, his community leadership, and his love of collaborative research, as other comments on this page attest.

But mostly John was the sunshine in many of our days. His laughter was infectious. His drive, and his occasional cantankerous moods, made everyone around him a better scientist and, more importantly, a better person.

I will close with one anecdote that reflects John's impish and hilarious sense of humor. We were nearly all geneticists in the lab then; we thought about problems from a genetics first mind set. Murray Grant and Laurence Godiard had cloned RPM1 in Cologne, and another first generation UNC post-doc, Doug Boyes, wanted to fractionate cells to determine where the RPM1 protein was localized. So, he ordered a separatory funnel, an old school (even then!) biochemistry tool that some of you may recall from Chemistry labs. It arrived and was sitting on Doug's bench outside my office. Doug was away from his bench. John saw the giant glass tear drop shaped funnel and yelled, for all to hear "what is this damn sep funnel doing here, this is a genetics lab!" We all laughed. A few minutes later Doug returned and was facing his bunch. John snuck up behind him, pinned his arms and yelled "Doug, friends don't let friends use sep funnels! There must be a genetic screen to answer your question!". The entire lab was laughing as Doug tried to escape.

We will miss John. One of a kind.

Jeff Dangl - December 31, 2024 at 02:55 PM

CM

thank you Jeff this brought a smile to our family. Thank you again for yours and Sarahs friendships over the years. John would have loved these stories! I posted a picture of John with long hair, I hope you can see it!

Cathy McDowell - December 31, 2024 at 05:50 PM

GA

“ I would like to express my gratitude, respect, and sympathy for having known John. Although we lived on different sides of the Atlantic our paths were quite similar. We both started setting up our own labs some 25 years ago and both chose to work on downy mildew disease. I was lucky to have met John at multiple meetings and we shared a lot of common interests. John visited our lab in Utrecht, Netherlands and I was hosted by him at Virginia Tech in 2017. We were spending a few writing days on our chapter on oomycete pathogens of Arabidopsis. Before starting our work week we went for a hike in the hills (see the picture of John). He was a great host and we traveled together with his team members to the Asilomar conference to meet our oomycete friends. We stayed in touch for some years, but we lost track a few years ago. It was a great shock to hear about his passing away. I wish his spouse and sons a lot of strength in this difficult period. We keep John's spirit alive!

Guido Van den Ackerveken



Guido van den Ackerveken - December 30, 2024 at 05:12 PM

JH

“ *Janice Hermann lit a candle in memory of John Matthew McDowell*



Janice Hermann - December 30, 2024 at 12:02 PM

JH

I was blessed to know John when he worked as a rotator at NSF. We bonded over VT and beautiful Blacksburg as I was an alumuni. John was one of the warmest people I have ever had the pleasure of working with. He was a light in my life in all of our interactions. My deepest condolences to his wife Cathy and his two sons. Rest in peace dear John.

Janice Hermann - December 30, 2024 at 12:08 PM



“ John was an outstanding mentor, friend, and colleague to me and, I’m certain, many other people. My first interaction with John was in 2007 when he brought me to Virginia Tech as a prospective graduate student and shuttled me around to meet many other professors in the program. After each of these meeting, John and I would chat for a few minutes about what each professor was working on. I was struck by how excited John was about each of his colleague’s research projects and how much knowledge he had of everyone else’s research. That excitement about the successes of others shone through in every subsequent interaction I had with John. He was always willing to make time for others and critically discuss any science project. It was impossible to come away from an interaction with John and not feel more positive about your research plans. I will also always remember how engaged John was with the speaker during any presentation. Whenever I would start to feel uncertain while giving a talk at Virginia Tech, I would find John in the audience, see him nodding along or contemplating the science, and be immediately filled with confidence again. My last interaction with John was earlier this year sitting next to him at a symposium and trading notes after each of the talks. He had insightful and positive things to say about each talk. As always, I came away from that time with John feeling more energized about science. John’s ability to elevate the people around him will be sorely missed.

I’m incredibly grateful for John having been one of the most important mentors in my life. I’m certain many, many other people at Virginia Tech and elsewhere feel the same way. John will be profoundly missed, but the positive impacts he made on so many people will remain. My deepest condolences to his family.

Christopher Clarke - December 30, 2024 at 10:10 AM

MT

“ I first met John 25 years ago in Jeff Dangl’s lab in North Carolina, where his intellect and warmth left an indelible impression on me. Over the years, our paths overlapped at various conferences and meetings around the globe, including the Arabidopsis conferences, MPMI, and OMGN gatherings. These meetings were not only venues for sharing science but also for building friendship. One of my fondest memories with John was at an Arabidopsis conference in Madison, where we shared a room. Our late-night conversations were filled with science, ideas, and laughter—a reflection of his boundless curiosity and generosity of spirit. Our professional relationship grew over the years as we collaborated on joint grants funded by UK and US agencies, leading to impactful publications. John’s scientific rigour and creativity made every project with him a rewarding experience.

In recent years, as our collaborative research continued, we frequently held online meetings to discuss progress and exchanged visits between our laboratories. In 2023, we had the honour of inviting John to a conference in Turkey. Although he was eager to join us, circumstances prevented his attendance. Nevertheless, we carried his spirit with us, quite literally, as we flew a flag for him in his absence (see below)—a testament to the high regard and affection everyone held for him.

Despite his challenges, John remained remarkably positive and engaged. In our recent online meetings, his optimism and enthusiasm for science shone brightly. Even in his final weeks, he stayed connected, and we were making arrangements for my postdoc to visit his lab in the New Year. His unwavering dedication to his work and his collaborators was truly inspiring.

John’s impact on the scientific community and on those fortunate enough to know him personally is immeasurable. He was not just a brilliant scientist but also a kind and generous human being who enriched the lives of everyone he met. His legacy will live on through his scientific contributions, his collaborations, and the countless lives he touched.

John, you will be deeply missed, but your memory will forever remain a source of inspiration to all of us.



Mahmut Tor - December 30, 2024 at 07:51 AM



“*Dr. John McDowell was on my PhD committee and taught me in one class. He is an excellent scientist, a great mentor, and a dear lovely friend. John helped me a lot on my way to pursuing the degree. I remember him nodding his head and smiling at me when I was giving seminars, giving me great encouragement and support. And that's not just for me. I remember John calling for donations of gloves and masks to the local hospitals during the pandemic. He is a great leader in this community, and I greatly admire him. He was always willing to help people with warm smiles, positive with life and work, so that I never knew he had fought cancer for this long time until this heartbreaking news. All great memories with John will be kept in heart, feeling precious and grateful along life.*”

Qi Li - December 29, 2024 at 10:51 PM

BV

“ I have known John since when I started my job at Virginia Tech in 2004. There are so many good things I could share about John but probably the one aspect of his character that I admire the most is how he never complained. I like to complain. I sometimes went to John and complained about failed experiments, problems with students, unsuccessful grants, rejected papers, administrators, ... and so on. But John never complained about anything. The most astounding moment for me was when I first saw John again after his surgery when his tumor had been removed. He walked up to my door with a big smile and asked how I was doing! I could not believe it. He had such a positive attitude; you would not have known what he had gone through and how uncertain his health was. He was grateful for how well he was doing and showed concern about everyone surrounding him. He continued with that same attitude until the very end. He never complained. He always was wondering how everyone around him was doing. He smiled every time he saw me or when he joined a meeting with others. He cheered people up with a joke and he appreciated every joke told by others. But while he was cheerful, he took his work extremely seriously. When I attended classes he taught, he was so unbelievably well prepared that his explanations seemed to come so naturally. When he chaired committees, he was so well prepared that meetings ran as smoothly as could be. He did not get stressed out or managed not to show it. And he was that until the last time I saw him. Smiling, caring, taking on life with stride. Making life better for everyone around him.



Boris Vinatzer - December 29, 2024 at 06:28 PM

JK

When three departments combined to form the School of Plant and Environmental Sciences, I had the pleasure of meeting John. We worked together on faculty promotion and tenure documents. John was such a pleasure to work with, a real class act. It is certain he will be missed.

Judy Keister - January 03, 2025 at 06:19 PM

SM

“ *I first met John in fall 2006, when I was a graduate student in one of his classes. I remember him as an intelligent professor, who enjoyed lively classroom discussions. He also had a great laugh; the kind of deep belly laugh that fills a room. Years later, when I joined VT as a faculty member, we reconnected. I run a summer research program for undergraduates, and John agreed to serve as a faculty mentor. He also led a scientific workshop for the students. His workshop, like his classes, was thoughtfully organized and interactive.*

Then in April of this year, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. One of the first colleagues I told was John. I knew he would understand - what I was feeling, what lay ahead, etc. Even though he was going through his own cancer treatments, he always made time for me and my health updates. He was enthusiastic for the successes and empathic for the setbacks. When my hair started to come back after chemo, he had me spin around, so he could see it in all of its short, curly and grey glory. He then talked about his hair and scars.

John became a dear friend, who made the hellscape of cancer more tolerable. I cannot believe I will have to go through the rest of this "journey" without him.

Sasha Marine - December 29, 2024 at 06:23 PM



“ I met John twice, once at an OMGN meeting and once at Virginia Tech for a course. He was memorable to me for his kind, friendly and welcoming personality and his outstanding contributions to oomycete science. I am sorry to hear this news, and send love to his family and close colleagues who will be missing him dearly. Arohanui, from New Zealand.

Rebecca McDougal - December 29, 2024 at 01:09 PM

YF

“ I first met John in 2010 when he served as a member of my Ph.D. committee. From the very beginning, John stood out as a mentor who was not only deeply knowledgeable but also kind, approachable, and always supportive. His guidance shaped my scientific journey in profound ways, and I feel incredibly fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn from him.



One of my earliest and most unforgettable experiences with John was attending his plant pathology class. It was in that classroom that I first discovered the complexities and wonders of plant pathology, a subject that would become central to my career. John's ability to teach with clarity, enthusiasm, and genuine passion made his classes unforgettable. He was not only an exceptional scientist but also an extraordinary teacher who inspired generations of students with his dedication and insight.

Throughout my career, John remained a steadfast mentor and supporter. His encouragement and extraordinary support gave me the confidence to pursue ambitious goals. Beyond his professional achievements, John will always be remembered for his warmth, kindness, and unwavering commitment to helping others succeed.

The loss of John is deeply felt, not only by those who had the privilege of knowing him personally but also by the broader scientific community, where his contributions have left a lasting legacy.

John's mentorship, teaching, and friendship have left an indelible mark on my life, and I will always be grateful for the time I shared with him. He will be greatly missed.

With heartfelt condolences,

Yufeng "Francis" Fang

Yufeng "Francis" Fang - December 29, 2024 at 10:06 AM

BM

“ I met John in the summer of 1996 at the MPMI meeting in Knoxville. I was a grad student, and he had started his postdoc in the Dangl lab not long before; our posters were adjacent, and we got to talking when we were both there during a poster session. John was kind and fun, and we became friends from then, as our careers tracked over the years with me a few years behind him - getting faculty positions on the east coast, publishing in similar areas, eventually both Editors-in-Chief of society journals. John was always helpful and provided great advice. I hired one of his excellent students as a postdoc in my lab. We would meet at conferences, grant review panels, etc., and he hosted me as a speaker at Va Tech. He was a wonderful colleague, mentor, and friend. I will greatly miss him. My condolences to his family.

Blake Meyers - December 29, 2024 at 05:45 AM



“ John was an excellent scientist as well as a kind and caring person. I knew him for close to twenty years when I worked as a research grants administrator for USDA. He was dedicated to the field of plant pathology and generous with his time, whether he was asked to serve on a review panel, to mentor a grad student or postdoc or to teach an innovative class. I was fortunate to work with him on the NSF/USDA Plant Biotic Interactions Program when he worked as a rotator at NSF. He worked hard, did a tremendous job and was a wonderful colleague.

Ann Lichens-Park - December 28, 2024 at 05:46 PM

ND

“ Nicole D. planted a grove of 5 [Memorial Trees](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of John Matthew McDowell.

Nicole D. - December 28, 2024 at 04:27 PM

ND

“ There are too many good things to say. Hopefully I can summarize and do this justice. John was not only a brilliant scientist, he was one of the kindest people I have ever met. I have known John since he was a post-doc and I was a grad student, and in 20 years, he has remained the most compassionate of humans. Every connection we had, whether via a student, over science, or working at NSF, taught me how to be a better scientist and person. He is gone way too soon, but this is the legacy he leaves - I, and countless others, came out a better human being for knowing him. If indeed there is a "beyond" (which I believe there is), then surely John and Michael are talking science, and sharing some good Vermont beer and apples. I will see them again, by and by.



Nicole Donofrio - December 28, 2024 at 04:26 PM

JR

“ I knew John through our research and love of *Phytophthora*. He was a dedicated teacher and scientist and will be missed by the Oomycete research community

Jean Ristaino - December 28, 2024 at 01:03 PM