

## **MCHB/EPI Atlanta GA Conference**

December 10 - 14, 2005

### **The Life and Legacy of Greg Alexander**

DONNA PETERSON: I'm very fortunate to work with very talented people who can do things like that for me. If you know that song or were listening to it, I think Greg would have liked being compared to a new day rising. Having faced mortality early in his life, he greeted each day as a new opportunity, an opportunity to, in the words of Tom Peters, "to live, to love, to learn, to leave a legacy." He loved that paradigm and he embraced it with great verve. If you knew him well, you know that he really did live. Thought he died way too soon he lived more intensely and more passionately than most of us can ever hope to.

At a service we held for him this past May a friend commented that he lived more in his 56 years than other people live in 100. He enjoyed life and all of the good things that it offered. He was all about the experience, whatever it was. He loved to travel. He was a fabulous cook. He was a great dancer. He had a marvelous voice. He loved good wine, good music, foreign films, modern art and of course his daughters who brought him enormous joy and enriched his life in many ways.

If you knew him well you know his capacity for love was equally intense. He loved fiercely and unequivocally. He loved being in the world. If he took you into his world, you were there to stay. He would do anything for you. He never met a

stranger. He would talk to anyone and was really interested in what they had to say. It wasn't just for fun. For him it was for real.

If you knew him well you know that he saw nearly every moment as a teaching moment and for him these were also learning moments. He was rarely alone. At work there was always someone in his office. At a conference he would be surrounded by other people. At home he would be talking to the neighbors, the mailman, a stranger looking for directions. He tried to divert the Dick Cheney parade down the street but that didn't work. He read voraciously and he listened well, but he could also command you to listen to him. However crazy the story seemed at first, you would soon find yourself intrigued and brought in.

Because he knew his time with us would be short he was interested in the legacy that he would leave. He actually talked about it a lot, not just his legacy, but our collective legacy as professionals in the field of public health and maternal and child health. How do we leave a legacy? How are we remembered?

I think we're remembered by what we create, what we build, what we pass on in wisdom to future generations. Greg can be assured that he did all of these things. And this morning we will hear from four individuals who were fortunate to be on the receiving end of his work and who helped him forge the legacy that he leaves behind.

As a creator he was tireless. His creative genius was channeled through his research. He had an unusual ability to see beyond what was readily apparent. He could look at a table of numbers and see three dimensional patterns. He had an incredible sense of space and spatial relationships and this allowed him to see things in the numbers, in the data that revealed new truths or suggested new avenues of inquiry. This skill also compelled him to rearrange the dishwasher every evening and to challenge the girls to pick the right size Tupperware container for the leftovers. He always won that one too.

As a builder he constructed a community of explorers, of fellow discoverers all around the world interested in the same questions. Greg published nearly 170 papers. But what's more remarkable to me is that he published them with nearly 200 different co-authors. He nurtured and was nurtured by this network of colleagues, peers with whom he could ponder questions, debate issues, think about applications, make a difference.

As a sage teacher and a mentor he was exceptional. He was patient to be sure, but he insisted that his students not just excel but that they understood their role as leaders. He challenged them every step of the way. He insisted that they grow beyond what even they believed was possible and he was never prouder than when one of them got it and took that next great step in their professional careers.

Any of us would be happy to leave the legacy he left through his academic life, the research, the scholarship, the colleagues, the students. He is known and will be remembered as one of the world's leading perinatal epidemiologists and he was very proud of that achievement but he wasn't satisfied with that. He considered himself first and foremost a maternal and child health professional and in that role he was more interested in how the science informed practice, how the programs achieved goals, how leaders were identified and supported in their critical roles and champions for the nation's children and families.

And in that role he took on responsibilities that others might have shunned. He ran the MCH Leadership Skills Training Institute for 14 years. He eagerly consulted with state health departments and MCH programs from Connecticut to Idaho, from Georgia to Arizona. He participated in national, regional and state level training programs. He served on the committee that placed graduate interns in state MCH programs. He served on various AMCHP and CDC and MCHB committees and he worked with the March of Dimes chapter in every state in which he ever lived.

Greg lived, loved and learned actively, passionately and as we will hear from our speakers, he left a wide legacy behind, broad and deep as a creator and a discoverer, a builder of a community of scholars and as a teacher and a mentor.

Thank you for being here today. More importantly, for taking away from this session and this conference what I hope will be a renewed commitment to promote and protect maternal and child health and all of us who have devoted our lives to leaving a legacy. Don't waste a moment. Work hard. Make sure your work matters, but make sure your life matters too. Try something new. Sing a song. Tell a bad joke. He did that too. Dance. Eat great food. Be the change you want to see in the world. Be a new day rising.

And now I'm happy to introduce to you four people who will speak to you about Greg's legacy. First we will have a former student and a collaborator, Dr. Martha Wingate. We will then hear from Dr. Hamisu Salihu, a co-investigator, a co-researcher. We will then hear from Sally Fogerty, a co-practitioner and then from Dr. Michael Kogan, a co-conspirator.

Dr. Martha Wingate is assistant professor in the Department of Health Care Organization and Policy, a graduate of the Maternal and Child Health doctoral program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, a former student and colleague of Greg's. Dr. Wingate?