



David Llewellyn Coffen

March 2, 1939 – December 18, 2002

David Llewellyn Coffen was born in St. John's, Newfoundland, and as a "Newfie" was proud of his Canadian heritage, even though he spent his entire professional life in the United States. He took his undergraduate degree in 1961 at the University of Toronto where he obtained a B.Sc. with First Class Honors in Chemistry. As a result of his distinguished record at Toronto, he was awarded a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to begin graduate study at MIT. He chose George Büchi as his mentor, and the influence of "GB" on David Coffen's approach to organic chemistry remained strong throughout his life. David's synthetic work on the Iboga alkaloids, which formed the major portion of his Ph.D. thesis, is still cited as the seminal contribution in this area.

Following completion of his Ph.D. in 1965, David Coffen took a Postdoctoral Fellowship at ETH where he worked in Albert Eschenmoser's laboratory. This was a time of great excitement at both ETH and in the Woodward group at Harvard where collaborative efforts towards the synthesis of vitamin B₁₂ were underway, and David found this heady atmosphere exhilarating. His year in Switzerland was not entirely consumed with academic activity, however, and among his several recreational ventures he learned to cook a delicious fondue. David returned to the U.S. in September 1966 to take up a position as Assistant Professor in the Chemistry Department at the University of Colorado. Boulder, with its strong tradition in physical organic chemistry, turned out to be a difficult setting to build a program in synthesis, but one of his accomplishments was the first synthesis of tetrathiafulvalene, a molecule of much interest at the time to those in search of organic semiconductors.

In mid-1971, David left the University of Colorado to begin a long and illustrious career in industry. His first position was as a Senior Scientist on the Chemical Research Staff of Hoffman-La Roche in Nutley, NJ, and over the course of twenty-four years with the company, he rose through the ranks to become Vice President for Chemistry Research. David's expertise in synthetic organic chemistry and his inclination towards application of his skills in the creation and development of pharmaceutical products made him a highly valued member of the Roche staff. During his career with Roche Nutley, he led

a program that resulted in the first U.S. multi-kilo production of β -lactam antibiotics, and he devised a new process for large scale vitamin D metabolite production. He was also a pioneer in establishing an industrial basis for using enzyme catalysis as a method for the synthesis of enantiomerically pure drugs. Towards the end of his career with Roche, David's responsibilities encompassed a very large segment of the company's research and development portfolio, including the entire process research operation as well as programs dedicated to the synthesis of prostaglandins, leukotrienes, steroidal anti-inflammatories and CNS agents. Alongside these endeavors, he succeeded in developing a broad-based program in combinatorial synthesis which resulted in a large number of both peptide and non-peptidic libraries. Lead candidates for the treatment of HIV and other diseases have emerged from these programs.

David retired from Hoffmann-La Roche in 1995 and joined ArQule, at that time a fledgling combinatorial chemistry company in Medford, Massachusetts, as its Senior Vice President. With David's help, ArQule grew to be one of the foremost practitioners of automated parallel synthesis, and the company rapidly expanded its research and development operations through collaborations with the pharmaceutical, agrochemical, and bioseparation industries. The move from New Jersey to Massachusetts was not without some anguish, the large disparity in housing costs being a particular concern, but David and his wife, Charlotte, were fortunate to find a delightful older home in Cambridge. In 1998, an opportunity presented itself for David to move to Southern California as the Chief Scientific Officer for Discovery Partners International and Vice President of Chem Rx, a combinatorial chemistry company acquired by DPI from Axys Pharmaceuticals when the latter merged with Celera Genomics. Although not instinctively a Californian, David relished the ambiance and climate of La Jolla after six decades of life in the northeastern U.S. and Canada. A heavy regimen of travel and a demanding workload had begun to take its toll, however, and David's health began to decline in the late spring of 2002. Shortly after a visit to Oregon State University as a guest lecturer, he was diagnosed with colon cancer, and in spite of a valiant effort to survive the disease, he died a few days before Christmas of that year.

David Coffen's service to the organic community took many forms. In addition to adjunct faculty appointments at Seton Hall University and at Rutgers University in Newark, he was in frequent demand as a visiting speaker. His carefully prepared lectures, lucid style, and wry humor made him an entertaining speaker who could translate the missions and constraints of industrial chemistry into a form that was immediately comprehensible to an audience of both students and professionals. David was above all a practical scientist who saw chemistry as the means to an end rather than an edifice of scholarly accomplishment. He was, nevertheless, acutely aware of the history of the subject, and he had a remarkable ability to recall incidents and events from his past, which had shaped his thinking about science in general and chemistry in particular.

David Coffen served on a number of scientific advisory boards during his career, including that of the Dow Chemical Company, IRIX Pharmaceuticals, Linden Technologies, the ACS Petroleum Research Fund, and the National Research Council of Canada's Steacie Institute. He was a member of the board of Editors of Organic Syntheses from 1988 until 1996 and was Editor-in-Chief of Volume 72. He was subsequently elected to the Board of Directors of Organic Syntheses and remained a

director until his death. He gave generously of his time to all these activities and often provided a perspective, which would not otherwise have been appreciated. He was good at thinking "outside the box," an attribute which undoubtedly contributed to his success in the world of industrial chemistry, and although his opinions on many subjects were unshakeable, his faith in his own judgement combined with a dry wit gave him an authority that left an indelible impression. To his close friends he was intensely loyal, and to his family he was a dedicated husband and father.

David Coffen is survived by his wife, Charlotte, his son, Charles, and his daughter, Kirsten.

James D. White
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