

OBITUARY

DR. MARIO IONA

JUNE 17, 1917-FEBRUARY 27, 2004

“It is both a pleasure and an honor to receive this award from AAPT. It is also somewhat unusual for someone who has complained as much as I have about textbook errors to receive an award sponsored, in part, by a textbook company.”

Mario Iona—Millikan Address, 1986

My father Mario was a rather stereotypical physics professor: to him “Casual Friday” meant wearing a *lab* coat rather than a *suit* coat. He enjoyed a long and varied career, on two continents, and at four universities.

Mario’s long career showed his respect for the discipline of physics, his respect for its practitioners, and his respect for its students.

Correct physics teaching was a major focus for Mario for over 60 years, and the American Association of Physics Teachers (AAPT) was one organization that played a very important role in his professional life. He authored over 500 publications, many of them appearing in *The Physics Teacher* and the *American Journal of Physics*. In addition to submitting articles, he served on AAPT’s editorial boards, and he wrote a long-running column called “Would You Believe...” where he described textbook errors and misleading statements that he easily found in almost every science textbook. AAPT awarded Mario a Distinguished Service Citation in 1971 and then its prestigious Millikan Award for “notable and creative contributions to the teaching of physics” in 1986. It was with pride that he reminded me that he was the first Chair of Section Representatives on the AAPT Executive Board when I was elected to that position in 1999.

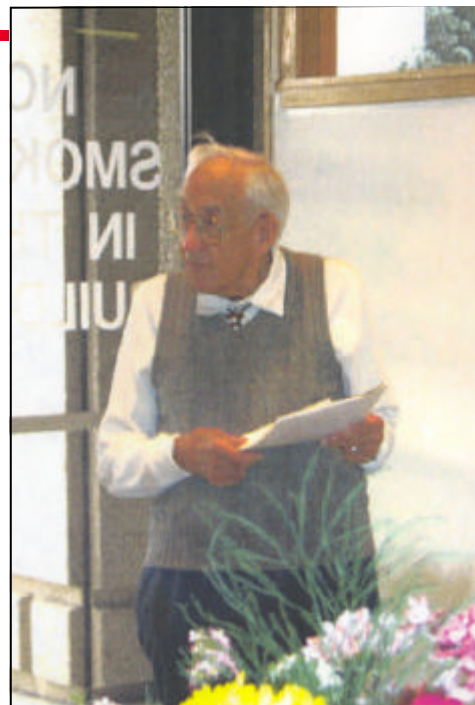
It was probably his viewing of the science textbooks that I used in elementary school and the quality of educational television at the time that catapulted him into a long career of working with publishers and professional societies to ensure that the highest quality and most accurate materials were available for use in teaching science. Over the years, he edited numerous manu-

scripts, textbook chapters, and elementary science series identifying content errors and misleading statements.

It was, however, his early work in cosmic ray research that brought him to Denver from the University of Chicago. Following an introduction by James Franck, Mario worked on (pre-Manhattan) neutron diffusion research at Chicago. Later he turned to cosmic ray research working with Marcel Schein where he collected data from equipment launched with large weather balloons. He continued his cosmic ray research when he moved to the University of Denver. For 35 years, he served as the manager of their High Altitude Laboratory located on Mt. Evans and at Echo Lake. His research, publications, and teaching advanced him from assistant professor, to professor, and finally to emeritus professor.

Mario and his twin sister Elizabeth were born in Berlin at the beginning of World War I. The family lived in various places in Germany and Austria as Mario’s father worked with X-ray equipment as an industrial physicist. Mario’s graduate work in Vienna was with Felix Ehrenhaft and Hans Thirring. He emigrated to the United States via Sweden (while waiting for a quota number) and continued his academic career at the University of Uppsala and then at Chicago.

But the University of Denver was his life. He served almost 40 years there on the faculty: teaching almost all the physics offerings at some time and serving on countless committees, boards, and panels for the university. After he retired in 1985, I joked that he kept better office hours than some professors who drew a regular paycheck. He was grateful for the support the university provided in his career. Remembering his own undergraduate time at the University of Vienna and the benefits he gained from the informal faculty-student interactions there, he funded the establishment of a Society of Physics Students/Sigma Pi Sigma student lounge housed in the DU Physics Building. This was a fitting tribute to his decades of service to SPS and $\Sigma\Pi\Sigma$, The Physics Honor Society.



Dr. Mario Iona delivers a speech at the Sigma Pi Sigma/Society of Physics Students Lounge ribbon-cutting ceremony, May 26, 2000.

Photograph by Warren Smith, Director of News/Public Affairs Office of Communications/Marketing, University of Denver

It was through the University that I met his wife Nancy (who is herself a Sigma Pi Sigma member). They were married for over 50 years, and raised two children myself and my sister Ann. Ann, her husband David, and two sons, Matthew and Daniel live in Delaware. My wife Janet and our son Adam live here in Denver.

A memorial service to celebrate Mario’s life was held in Evans’ Chapel at the University of Denver on March 25, 2004.

If you would like to make a memorial gift in Mario’s name, please do so to the American Association of Physics Teachers, One Physics Ellipse, College Park, MD 20740-3845.

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