Sidney Pestka

Sid died Dec. 22, 2016, surrounded by family. The quintessential scientist since adolescence, he had been afflicted with dementia for the last few years of his life.

Born in Drobin, Poland, at 21 months of age he moved near family to the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, and then at age 8 to Trenton, where he excelled at Trenton Central High School. He received a scholarship to Princeton University, from where he graduated *summa cum laude* with a B.A. in chemistry. He received his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine on full scholarship. Afterwards, he worked at the National Institutes of Health in the laboratory of Marshall W. Nirenberg. Sid’s early work on the genetic code, protein synthesis and ribosome function led to Nirenberg’s 1968 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

In 1969, Sid left the NIH for the Roche Institute of Molecular Biology, where he focused on defining how antibiotics worked and proteins are synthesized and, later, interferons. There he was first to purify interferon alpha and beta; the first to clone mature interferons; and the first to develop a commercialized recombinant biotherapeutic—Roferon A. Sid is known as the "Father of Interferon" for his seminal work on interferon, work that gave birth to a $6 billion dollar market directed at the therapy of hepatitis, multiple sclerosis, cancer, and other diseases that affect mankind.

Sid was Emeritus Professor of the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, which he joined in 1986 and where he served as Chairman for 25 years. In 1990, with wife Joan he founded PBL Assay Science—today a company of 35 employees—to develop cytokine assays and reagents and to expand interferon’s clinical utility in cancer and viral diseases.

While his work developing interferons garnered many awards and helped hundreds of thousands of patients across the globe, he never hesitated to stop work on a dime to help a family member, relative or friend—or really anyone who happened to network to him—if they were having difficulty with a serious medical problem. While Sid himself would rarely speak of the assistance he provided to these individuals, it was not uncommon for various family members to be approached by strangers—even at Sid’s funeral service—who told stories of how he helped them or their loved ones.

Sid was a warm, caring, good-humored man. He had a face that was often mistaken for Woody Allen’s, a contagious smile, loved to laugh and appreciated the art of telling a good, clean joke. He also had a poetic side and a thoughtful and elegant way with the written word, almost exclusively using an old-fashioned fountain pen filled with his signature turquoise ink. During his last few years, his mantra “keep it going” directed everyone with whom he interacted to make the most of every day and do the best in everything you do.

Sid is survived by his wife of 56 years, Joan; his sister, Doris Goldman; his three children Steven, Sharon, and Robert ’88 and their spouses Caroline, Ned and Kazumi; and nine grandchildren, Hannah, Eleanor, Leela, Maya, Beatrice, Ashenafi, Robin, Sabina and Harry.