David and Dorothy Perkins

MARRIED SCIENTISTS, PIONEERS IN FUNGUS STUDIES AT STANFORD

By Connie Siskitares
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They worked side by side for nearly 50 years at Stanford University doing scientific research on fungi and its use in genetics studies. And when illness felled David and Dorothy Perkins, married for 56 years, they managed an almost perfectly timed tandem exit.

David Perkins, 87, died on Jan. 2. His wife, whom everyone called “Dot,” died four days later. She was 84.

David Perkins’ death followed a two-week hospitalization for pneumonia. He had worked at his Stanford lab until three days before he was hospitalized. His wife, who had been ill for many years, died in hospice care at the family home in Menlo Park.

“They were truly partners in everything: love, work and now death,” said Stanford colleague Namboori Raju.

David Perkins went to work at Stanford as an assistant professor and researcher in 1949. Soon he met Dorothy Newmeyer, who arrived at Stanford from Yale University with a group of biology lab colleagues. She eventually became a senior research scientist in Perkins’ lab, working with him in pioneering research on the fungus Neurospora. They married in 1951.

The couple published numerous scientific papers on their work, he about 150 and she about 30. They wrote 20 papers together.

Dot Perkins was one of the few women in the 1950s to not only earn a Ph.D., but earn it in the sciences. She received it in biology.

Models of generosity

Friends said both were humble, unassuming and hard working. “They were extremely kind and generous,” said Stanford colleague David J. Jacobson. “They had a great sense of what they felt was right. They were very involved in human rights issues, not only in the scientific community, but with global issues.”

The couple reached out to help low-income youth locally, bringing students from East Palo Alto to the lab for tutoring.

“In the lab, I got an education at Stanford without going through the application process and paying the tuition,” said Robert Lloyd, remembering about his work under the Perkinses in the late 1960s and early ‘70s when he was a student at Foothill College. Soon, it became too difficult for Lloyd to juggle work at the lab and his classes at Foothill, so the Perkinses suggested he quit the job and devote his full energy to his schooling.

He couldn’t afford that, so the couple gave him a loan. They said he could either repay them or help someone else.

“Because of the model Dot and David set for me, I was able to do both,” Lloyd said.

Their daughter, Sue Perkins, a river geologist in Seattle, said her parents “had the very best of Christian ethics. They gave a lot of themselves to people, and gave a lot to philanthropy. They cared a lot about the environment, about population issues and political issues. Mom worked actively against the Vietnam War.”

She said her parents instilled in her a love of the outdoors and for learning.

“My fondest memory is hiking in the mountains on camping trips,” Sue Perkins said.

“Dad always worked 6½ days a week, so this was a special time when everyone stopped working and you just would be.”

Welcoming hearts

David Dexter Perkins was born in Watertown, N.Y. and received his bachelor’s degree in biology from the University of Rochester in 1955. He got his Ph.D. in zoology from Columbia University, then joined the faculty at Stanford. He was forced to retire in 1989 when he hit 70, but he was quickly appointed an emeritus professor and continued what would become 58 years of research on neurospora without interruption.

Dot Perkins was born in 1922 in Philadelphia and originally trained as a pharmacist, graduating from the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy in the mid-1940s. She completed her Ph.D. at Stanford in 1951. Ill health forced her to retire from the lab in 1988, but she continued for several years while at home to edit the scientific papers of her biology lab colleagues.

The Perkinses were “a second set of parents” to former Stanford graduate student Alice Schroeder: “David and Dot not only welcomed me into the lab, but into their home and their hearts,” Schroeder wrote on a memorial Web site to the couple. “Dot became a mentor and colleague. She showed me that you could be a mother and homemaker and also be active in civic affairs, play the cello and still be an excellent scientist.

“David was my scientific father — pulling, pushing, and yes, nagging me to be better than I thought I could be,” Schroeder added. “He was also a great source for good murder mysteries, travel tips and stories.”

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