

## The Mathias P. Mertes 75<sup>th</sup> Birthday Symposium and Nuclear Magnetic Resonance Laboratory Dedication

October 19, 2007

### Dedication Remarks by David VanderVelde, Director of the KU NMR Lab

When I was in graduate school—the first time—in English literature I had to take a Chaucer class. The first lesson in reading Chaucer is that words that look familiar may have meant something different then. One of those is the word “solemn.” In the Middle Ages, a solemn occasion is one where you put on your good clothes, had a little pageantry, then brought out the victuals. They were fun, never dull. We’d like to be on that plan this afternoon. There are corks to pop and a keg to tap, waiting for us, but first the business of this dedication.

In a few moments we’ll be going over to the Structural Biology Center to dedicate the 800 MHz NMR Lab in Matt’s memory. When Matt died in 1989, nobody had the idea for this building, or that an 800 MHz NMR would be practical at all, or that KU would be way ahead of our regional peers in getting such an instrument. The experiments we do every day on that instrument hadn’t been invented yet. We’ve been hearing in the past day about Matt’s scientific interests and about what Matt did, but Matt wasn’t a structural biologist. Matt wasn’t recognized in the NMR world as a famous spectroscopist, and even within KU, he didn’t use the NMR any more or any differently than many other people did. But when we began planning the SBC project, while it was still a grassy field back there, it was my deeply held conviction that Matt’s name should be on it somehow. It took a few years, but enough other people agreed that today we’re getting it done.

The reasons for that, for me, go back to 21 years ago tomorrow, approximately, although the wheels had been in motion longer back than that. One fine mid-October Saturday, like tomorrow promises to be, my phone rang. It was Matt calling. The search committee he was chairing to hire an NMR lab director had just finished meeting and he was inviting me to come out for an interview. Now there is certainly a rule against calling candidates before the interview list has been formally reviewed and approved. For all I know, there was a rule against it then too. Matt’s enthusiasm has already been mentioned, but I am not sure his enthusiasm extended to following rules that interfered with his other enthusiasms. I found out in that first phone call that Matt could be persuasive. He had been doing a lot of persuading that year. He (and a number of other people, who I am happy to note are here today), had persuaded NIH to give them a 300 MHz NMR. Then he had persuaded the university to double the money to make it a 500 instead and finance it by selling bonds. Then he had persuaded the Vice Chancellor for Research that you couldn’t have an instrument like that without someone to run it, which would require salary money for a new permanent position. KU had some campus-wide service facilities already, and Matt and his colleagues weren’t giving up until KU had an NMR lab also. None of those things had happened overnight, or without causing some consternation. At the time, it struck some people as a distressing amount of resources to commit just to one thing. It smacked a little of “big science,” at least for KU’s standard of the time. But all those other dominoes had in fact fallen, and now it was my turn to be persuaded. So a few weeks later, I met Matt for the first time, when I interviewed here.



The interview went great. The airline lost my luggage and there was freezing rain as we came in from the airport, with a few seconds of sheer terror when I thought an out of control semi was going to push Matt's son's classic 60's Mustang right over the side of the Kansas River bridge. Don't let anybody tell you that you can't interview successfully in your ugliest shoes or that shaving is necessary—I got the job. But I came away from that short interview tremendously impressed with KU, where collegiality seemed to be the norm rather than the exception. Matt was certainly part of that, but so were many, many other people. Soon after, I had another call from Matt, this one with an offer. I cut the rest of my job search short. It was a few months before I could get here, but the phone calls didn't stop. That spring Matt was working on a program project on reverse transcriptase inhibition, and invited me to join in on that proposal. That group also included Mike Doughty, who I hadn't met because he didn't arrive until January. If that meant Mike was wet behind the ears, well, I was still a fetus, but we went to work anyway.

The time I actually overlapped here with Matt, I won't say a lot about, except it was just too short. It is distressing to me to dwell on how long ago it was that those things happened; I was young and in many ways dumb. But not too dumb to observe and learn from what Matt did. Matt brought great energy and enthusiasm to bear on establishing things, for instance the NMR lab, in which he had a stake, but not the only stake, or necessarily the biggest stake. It wasn't just Matt or Matt and a few cronies. You hear people use that figure of speech about getting a nose in the tent with the implication that it's what you do when you aren't welcome to come in through the front door. But when Matt pitched a tent, it wasn't a tiny little mountain tent with the flaps all closed, it was a circus tent. The door was open, and new people could just walk in. Fortunately he wasn't the first, the only, or the last KU scientist to approach things that way.

Other people have often perceived this to be true about us at KU. I hosted a visit by my thesis advisor a few years after I came, and as I was driving him back to the airport, he said, "I had a nice day. You've got good colleagues. I've been at Illinois 35 years, it's my home and I wouldn't leave it, but the old guys there teach the young guys how to be bastards. That's the way it's always been." Matt taught by example that it was possible to prosper by share and share alike. You didn't have to be Mother Theresa to appreciate how this could work. It's enlightened self interest to choose to compete with other universities in this way, places where they won't or just can't manage to do it, and we might just get some things before those places do.

To get the SBC built, some of us had to persuade a number of people at KU to commit quite a bit of money—money they had to borrow—to the project. It took a few years and it is still a work in progress. To make a long story short, the way that was accomplished, in my view, is that we borrowed Matt's playbook. We watched what he did, and 15 years later, we did it again. We didn't forget that we had borrowed it, not invented it, and always meant to give credit where credit was due—or else we'd be stealing it. So today we're returning it with a new brass plaque.