

In Memoriam: Jim Schmolze

I have first met Jim about 12 years ago, On March 1, 1994. Jim was then the director of the graduate programs at Tufts CS department, and I have asked to meet him to decide whether I should submit my application to Tufts. I wanted to find out if I had a real chance of getting a teaching or research assistantship to support my studies.

I still remember that day very well, partly because it became one of the most important days of my life. Not only that, but also because in this very first meeting with Jim I got to appreciate how different he was from “ordinary” people. After greeting me in a way that was very warm and welcoming and reviewing my transcripts, he asked “Tell me, what do you like doing?”

This meeting was my first encounter with so many of Jim’s wonderful qualities that I got to admire through the 12 years during which Jim was my teacher, my mentor, a friend and a colleague.

Jim did most of his research in the area of Knowledge Representation and Reasoning, which is a field that’s sometimes called the “core AI”. It is concerned with representing the knowledge symbolically and developing algorithms for automated reasoning with that knowledge to enable intelligent behavior. The range of applications for which Jim developed representations and algorithms (alone or with co-authors) is truly remarkable: natural language understanding, production rule systems, planning, decision theory, speech recognition.

Throughout his career as a scientist Jim has authored and co-authored works that were published in the premier archival AI conferences such as AAI, IJCAI and KR, journals like Cognitive Science, Computational Intelligence, Knowledge Based Systems and others. Some of these publications are cited 20 years after they came out, which attests to their significance.

But when in 1996 I decided to ask Jim if he’d be my PhD Advisor, I didn’t know any of that – I knew little about evaluation of research beyond reading the papers themselves and figuring if I liked the work. I knew that the course in AI that he taught had most fascinating topics and fun assignments, and was mathematically most rigorous of all courses that I had taken in the Masters program.

I have also, at that time, read a paper by Jim and his colleague Wayne Snyder on using term re-writing semantics to detect redundant production rules. This work had all marks of respectable research: the elegance of a generalized mathematical solution with applicability to real practical problems.

So, combined with Jim’s amazing personality, what more could I wish for in an advisor? In the following years as I’ve worked with Jim as his PhD student I had witnessed so many times his amazing qualities

- His intellectual curiosity, courage, and focus on what's significant. He was never driven by fame, fashion or money. Instead, it mattered whether the problem was interesting and important, and the solution – rigorous and practically applicable.
- His readiness to listen, his special gift of connecting to others through his genuine compassion and appreciation of all aspects of human life: professional, personal, family and community.
- His respect and caring attitude towards his students. There was always an aura of unassuming dignity, sincerity, as well as wonderful humor around him.
- The importance he gave to enjoying one's life at its fullest, his willingness to share his joy with other people, and to help them in their worthy pursuits.

I've worked very closely with him for 6 years and our collaboration continued after my graduation from Tufts. There are many things that I learned from him and he has made such a great impact on my professional and personal life, it is impossible to describe it in any reasonable amount of time. It is equally impossible for me to express in any words the utmost gratitude, respect and admiration I have for Jim's noble and generous soul, the power of his intellect, and the breadth of the reach with which his life affected so many others in so many wonderful ways.

Tamara Babaian.