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OBITUARY

Bruce L. Danto, M.D.: A Street Smart Forensic Psychiatrist

Over the years, the multidisciplinary approach to death investigation has proven to be the most successful. Forensic experts from different backgrounds have shared their knowledge in their scientific pursuit of truth and justice. With the passing of our esteemed colleague and friend, Dr. Bruce L. Danto of Fullerton, California and formerly of Detroit, Michigan, we have come to realize how the give-and-take between specialists leads to many long-term professional collaborations that culminate in strong bonds of friendship. Our reciprocal interest in each other's disciplines of psychiatry and pathology united us several times in collaborative intellectual endeavors that satisfied each of our curiosities about the relationship between diseases of the mind and body.

The news of Bruce's sudden death in Fullerton, CA on March 21, 1998 came as a shock, especially when it followed an unexpected diagnosis of metastatic lung cancer less than two months earlier. As physicians, we have learned that cancer and its treatment can be formidable opponents even against the best of hosts. Although death came quickly to Bruce at the age of 70, we only wish we could have had more time together to say goodbye. However, knowing Bruce, he would have preferred passing on the good-byes and opting for laughter and lively intellectual discourse over dinner at a four-star restaurant. Although he was one of America's premiere death investigators, Bruce was too full of life to think about his own mortality. He was a tender loving person who brought joy to all who knew him.

Bruce Danto led an intriguing life that mixed a variety of specialties into a character with Hollywood appeal. Licensed as a social worker, medical doctor, certified psychiatrist, and sworn police officer, Bruce Danto led an action-packed life that many of us would hope to have. After receiving his B.A. in sociology, M.S.W. in psychiatric social work, and M.D. from Wayne State University, he went on to become a forensic and police psychiatrist who examined thousands of criminal defendants and testified as an expert in court on the mental state of these individuals. As a police officer in the field for many years, he had firsthand experience dealing with the most complex criminal minds and dangerous individuals. As part of his training in street crime and terrorism, Dr. Danto became a major in the Medical Corps' Hostage Survival and Terrorism Unit and trained hundreds of law enforcement trainees at Detroit Police Academy and elsewhere. During his lifetime, he faced down barricaded gunmen hold up in city tenements and scaled ladders to calmly negotiate with armed individuals threatening to take their own lives and the lives of those around them. In fact, he and his family were once held hostage by an armed and



BRUCE L. DANTO

mentally ill individual. With such experience, it's no wonder that Bruce was an avid gun collector and weapons expert.

There was also a strong intellectual side to Bruce who documented his vast experience on the street, in the classroom, and in the courts. He was the author of hundreds of scientific papers in the field of psychiatry published in various professional journals throughout the world. Although he published several books, *Jail House Blues* (1) was one of his most notable works which was devoted to the study of suicidal behavior in jail and prison. The book had tremendous impact on the humane treatment of suicidal inmates. For his contributions to the field of suicidology, he was elected President of the American Association of Suicidology in 1979-80. He also served on several editorial boards, including *The American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology* for several years. He was member of several mental health committees, as well as an officer in many professional organizations. He acted as a Consultant Psychiatrist for the Wayne County Probation Department, US Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Michigan, and the Wayne and Oakland County Prosecutors Offices. For his efforts, Dr. Danto received several research awards, the Chavas Rega Humanitarian Award, the Pawolski Peace Prize, and the Mayor's Medallion Community Service Award. Among his many high-profile cases, Bruce was involved in the Jimmy Hoffa case and the Atlanta and Oakland child murders.

One of the most important persons in Bruce's life was his dear wife, Joan. Bruce's feelings for her were best expressed in his acknowledgement in his book, *Prime Target* (2), "To my wife, Joan, my partner, love, and support, mother of our four children, and more than a daughter to my late mother. For over 36 years, we have shared excitement, adventure, and risks. She has survived my harrowing assignments and motivated me to survive. She is

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that rarity, a true friend, lover, and inspiration.” Bruce and Joan were inseparable and she was truly the center of Bruce’s universe. He leaves behind four children: Dr. Jeffrey Danto of Farmington Hills, MI, Susan Danto of Fullerton, CA, Lisa Danto-Wasserman of Sutton Bay, MI, and Steven Danto of San Diego, CA; six grandchildren; and his brother, Prof. Arthur Danto, the eminent philosopher and art/culture critic of Columbia University, New York, NY.

Although Bruce is gone, his knowledge and professional experiences will always be with us because of the large body of scholarly

writings that he leaves behind. For those of us in the Academy who knew Bruce personally, his spirit will always live on in our memories.

References

1. Danto BL. Jail house blues: studies of suicidal behavior in jail and prison. Orchard Lake, MI: Epic Publications, Inc., 1973.
2. Danto BL. Prime target: security measures for the executive at home and abroad. Philadelphia; The Charles Press, Publishers, 1990.