

2009 William Allan Award Introduction: Huntington F. Willard

Terry Hassold^{1,*}



Terry Hassold

Today, I am delighted to introduce my former boss, my colleague, and my dear friend—Huntington F. Willard—as this year's recipient of what I think of as our Most Valuable Player Award: the William Allan Award. Those of you who have followed human genetics for the past quarter century will share my sentiment since this is an award that Hunt richly deserves.

I first met Hunt in the early 1980s when I visited the University of Toronto, where he had recently taken his first faculty position. My first thought was, "Gosh, he's just a kid," and this surprised me because he was already a renowned geneticist. Indeed, by the time he completed his PhD degree from Yale University, he had already trained with such distinguished geneticists as Sam Latt and Leon Rosenberg and had published 15 papers. His early papers on replication with Sam Latt—conducted

while he was an undergraduate at Harvard University—are still regarded as landmarks in the field.

Chromosomes have been the love of Hunt's career, but his most important love came while he was finishing up some of this undergraduate work while starting his PhD work at Yale. After hours Hunt needed to work on the microscope and borrowed time on one in the clinical laboratory, where he met Vicky Powers—now Vicky Willard—a technologist in the facility. The rest, as they say, is history. Vicky went on to be Hunt's laboratory supervisor for many years, but more importantly, together they raised two wonderful children, Tori and Brook.

Following a post-doctoral fellowship with Kirby Smith at Johns Hopkins University, Hunt set up his own shop in Toronto, where he started two major lines of investigation that we celebrate today: first, his ground-breaking work on the organization of human centromeres, initiated at a time when unique sequences were hard enough to study, let alone the morass of repeats that comprise human pericentromeric DNA. Hunt's work led to the initial characterization of alpha satellite DNA and—as indicated by this meeting's invited session on centromeres—he and his trainees continue to be the pace setters in this field. Second, he returned to his undergraduate interest in X chromosome inactivation, initiating a series of elegant experiments that led to the identification of Xist. And again, twenty years later Hunt's laboratory and the laboratories of his trainees continue to lead the field in mammalian dosage compensation.

After a brief stint at Stanford University, Hunt moved his laboratory to Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland to chair the Department of Genetics. He was charged with taking the existing department (which at the time had five faculty members) and building it into a real human genetics department. In 3 years his faculty of five turned into a faculty of 26 and became known as "Hunt's Dream Team." Stuart Schwartz, Pat Hunt, and I were the first to join. I am not sure we were really the dreams, but we were followed by a number of truly exceptional human geneticists, including Suzanne Cassidy, Aravinda Charkavarti, Evan Eichler, Anne Matthews, Robert Nicholls, Nathaniel Robin, Matthew Warman, Georgia Wiesner, and many others. I contacted these old colleagues several weeks ago about a get-together here to celebrate Hunt's Allan Award. All responded immediately and enthusiastically. Watching them greet each other earlier at this meeting like dear old friends made

¹Washington State University, Pullman, WA, USA

*Correspondence: terryhassold@wsu.edu

DOI 10.1016/j.ajhg.2010.01.003. ©2010 by The American Society of Human Genetics. All rights reserved.

it evident that the magic of those years was true for all of us.

What makes a department a set of colleagues rather than a set of individuals? I have contemplated that question a lot in the intervening years. Clearly it is leadership, but that seems a nebulous explanation. In the case of Hunt's Dream Team it was his strategy for building and running his department. He said at the outset, "We'll have fun until the money runs out." He also said, "Everybody should have somebody to play with in the sandbox." He built his group around themes and fostered interaction. He mentored junior faculty, and he created an environment where students were raised by the department, not just a P.I. Importantly, at every opportunity he talked about our research. Not his research—although he was conducting pioneering studies on human artificial chromosomes and X chromosome inactivation studies at the time. Our research. This meant that he had to keep his finger on the pulse of the place, and to understand what we were doing and where our studies were leading. And let us be clear: although he cheered us all on, he set a very high bar and admonished us when he thought we were not working hard enough or aiming high enough. To his laboratory group he was known as "The Hammer." To his faculty he was famous for his "Attila the Hunt" memos.

Sadly, all good things must come to an end. In 2003 Hunt was recruited to Duke University, where he was appointed the founding Director of the Institute for Genome Sciences and Policy. Make no mistake: the Willard laboratory continues to flourish, and the research continues to reflect Hunt's very high standards. However, what has been remarkable to me is that, in addition to the research and the heavy administrative demands associated with running an institute, Hunt views his new job as payback time for the training he received. At Duke he received a Howard Hughes Professorship, an award that has allowed him to develop a truly innovative and integrated teaching program focusing on undergraduate education in the genome sciences. Unlike many who view undergraduate education as a necessary inconvenience and freshmen as an altogether foreign species, Hunt relishes his interactions with them—indeed, as he has told me, he doesn't "have to teach" freshmen, he "gets to teach" them.

Quite simply, Hunt represents the best our society has to offer—as a researcher, as an administrator, as a former president of this society, and as an educator. I am truly honored, on behalf of our society, to introduce Huntington Willard as the recipient of the 2009 William Allan Award.