

Memorial Resolution – Carlos Peralta

It is with a heavy heart and a light heart that I am here today to talk about Carlos Peralta. Heavy because he left us way too soon, in June of 2020, and there's a Carlos-sized hole at the university that cannot be filled. But my heart is also light. Because this gives me the opportunity to introduce Carlos to those of you here who never had the joy of knowing him, and to reminisce about him with those who do.

Born in Santiago, Chile, Carlos was the son of an indentured nitrite miner from northern Chile. While it seems to me that having a father forced to remove minerals from the earth would make one loathe geology, and rocks in general, not so with Carlos. He was a man of insatiable curiosity and his passion for learning could not be deterred. According to his daughter, Gabriela, his wonder for the world around him was sparked in his childhood visits to the Natural History Museum of Santiago, and his mineral collecting started soon after. Later, he was forced to burn all of his books and bury his love of intellect and natural history during a coup d'état. But that couldn't stop him either. Through determination, skill, and some luck, he escaped the dictatorship in Chile, and found his way to the US. In 1981, he received his Bachelor of Science in Wildlife Biology from Murray State University in Kentucky. In 1985, he received his Master of Science in Biology and Ecology from the same school. In 1992, he started his doctoral studies in Plant Ecology from Southern Illinois University. Rocks and biology – you couldn't go more than 15 minutes in conversation with him without one or the other coming up.

In 1998, he started the position that he would stay in for more than 20 years. As a course coordinator in Introductory Biology 151 and 152, Carlos worked directly with what I estimate to be more than 10,000 early career undergraduates and a few hundred graduate students. This could very well be an underestimate. Frankly, the numbers are staggering. What's more incredible to me, though, is that when students spoke with Carlos, they didn't feel like they were only one of a multitude. I should know. My office was directly across the hall from his for thirteen years and I got to overhear an untold number of one-hour, two-hour, I-lost-track-of-how-many-hour meetings with students, and by the end of them all, Carlos knew everything about those students, from what they had for breakfast that morning, to what they were concerned about on the upcoming exam, to what their great grandmother's favorite book was and why. And those students came back to visit, often years later. Very few weeks went by that Carlos didn't have a former student, or two or three, in his office, now doctors, professors, homemakers, curators, you name it. And they all had stories of how Carlos had helped them and inspired them to do what they wanted to do. I talked earlier about Carlos' two passions – rocks and biology. But his biggest love was for people. Well, that and chocolate. He was always trying to twist someone's arm into giving him some chocolate.

Carlos' position was in the Department of Integrative Biology, but his service to the university and to this community didn't stop at the doors of Noland Hall. For as long as I knew him, he was a devoted volunteer of the UW Geology Museum, donating his time at nearly every museum event and regularly staffing the museum on Saturdays and holidays. It is because of Carlos that my young daughters touched a real T-Rex bone and a meteorite. What child gets to do that? And it's because of Carlos that both of them held a very small chunk of Mars in their hands. I don't know if I should have shared that here today. I think maybe he wasn't supposed to let us touch

that Mars rock, but honestly, I don't know. So much of what Carlos did and said, he did so with a conspiratorial twinkle and chuckle. And that's a lot of fun, especially when you're a kid. Or when you're an undergraduate. It was always like he was letting you in on a little secret of the world that just you two shared. You can't help but be inspired.

I don't know how he had time to do so, but he also volunteered outside the university. He was a very active member of the Madison Gem and Mineral Club. In his position as education chairman of that group, he did many programs at schools, libraries, and for other clubs. And every year, he held a "rock party," when he opened up his own extensive collection and his home and gave away I don't know how many tons of rocks to kids. This is in addition to the rocks and fossils he always had on hand the rest of the year to give away to any child who looked like they needed one.

I was very deliberate in my choices of photos to accompany this resolution. Rather than a typical portrait, I wanted to show Carlos the way I think we should remember him, teaching and inspiring young people (and old). The first two photos were taken by UW Geology Museum staff. He's obviously showing off some amazing things. The last one is him with his daughter, Gabriela Farfan, who is now a curator for the National Gem and Mineral Collection at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

Carlos is greatly missed. His dedication to his students, official and unofficial, was humbling. His impact on the lives he touched here is profound.

*Respectfully submitted,
Kerry Martin, Teaching Faculty, Department of Integrative Biology*