

TRIBUTE

Tristram Smith: A Humble ‘Rock Star’ of Autism Research

Our university experienced a tremendous loss in August with the sudden passing of Tristram Smith at the age of 57. Tris was the Haggerty-Friedman Endowed Professor in Developmental Behavioral Pediatric Research at the Medical Center. In part due to the far-reaching impact of his clinical autism research, in part because of his quiet wisdom and generosity, and in part because of his kind heart, he was well known, respected, and loved in the autism community in Rochester and nationally.

An early friendship with a young man with autism inspired him to apply to the doctoral program in psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, where in 1983 he was accepted to work with O. Ivar Lovaas on the UCLA Young Autism Project. The research collaboration between Tris and Lovaas in the late 1980s and early 1990s provided the first demonstration that children with autism spectrum disorder could respond positively to behavioral interventions and that, for some children, intervention resulted in significant gains on assessment and clinical outcomes. This seminal work not only altered conventional wisdom regarding the possibility of interventions in autism, but also ignited advocacy efforts and provided both hope and a plan for many families.

In 2000, Tris joined the faculty of the Medical Center, where an interdisciplinary, federally funded autism research center had been recently established under the leadership of Patricia Rodier. With his collaborators, Tris was awarded a Studies to Advance Autism Research in Treatment (STAART) Center grant, thus beginning a very successful series of funded investigations based in Rochester. Acknowledging the significant role that families play in their children’s treatment, he collaborated on several multisite projects involving parents as well as children to address disruptive behavior and feeding challenges. Always mindful of how his research translated into meaningful outcomes for families, Tris recently focused much of his work on the application of evidence-based interventions in real-world settings. Through extensive collaborations with the community and researchers around the country, Tris led studies designed to support parents, educators, and other school personnel in helping children with autism access appropriate and high-quality services in home and public school settings—often with an emphasis on families who are traditionally under-represented in research.

Tris will be equally remembered for his kindness, integrity, creativity, and a quick and dry wit. Despite his many influential

accomplishments, we remember him as a gentle and compassionate person who shied away from the spotlight in favor of highlighting his collaborators and students. His collaborator, division chief, and friend of many years, the physician Susan Hyman, who often described Tris as a “rock star” in autism research, said, “He may have been unassuming, but when he spoke, everyone would listen.”

In his time at Rochester, he became a valued mentor to numerous students and other trainees. Many of us sought him out for his wisdom, and Tris shaped our careers with respect, gentle encouragement, and generosity of experience and credit. He saw the best in his mentees, as he did in everyone he partnered with—from researchers to families.

Despite all that he gave to his colleagues and mentees, Tris always saved the best of himself for his family. It was clear in watching them together that Tris was completely devoted to his wife, Jenny, son, Jonah, and daughter, Maddy. This love also shone through when he gave occasional updates on new family adventures, transitions, and accomplishments—always beaming with pride.

I first met Tris in the lobby of a hotel during an Association for Behavior Analysis International annual conference when I was an undergraduate student. He was kind enough to speak with me about a potential job as a research assistant on one of his newly funded studies. I was told by my undergraduate mentor that Tris was “such a nice man,” but also an exceptionally brilliant researcher. Intimidated, I sat down on an uncomfortable faux-plastic chair and handed over my CV. Tris walked me through a job description, asked me a few questions, but then—a huge smile overtaking his face—asked me if he could show me pictures of his new daughter. He and Jenny had just finalized the adoption, and he

was bursting to share the news. I entered that meeting ready to weigh the implications of doing research under the mentorship of a brilliant and accomplished man, but it was as we sifted through those pictures that I thought, “This is the kind of person I want to shape my future.”

—SUZANNAH IADAROLA

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UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM: At a time when autism spectrum disorder was widely considered untreatable, Smith’s research provided the first demonstration that children with the condition could respond positively to behavioral interventions.

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