

Dr Gil Ben-Shlomo



On Wednesday night, Oct 21st, 2020, Dr Gil Ben-Shlomo passed away in New York. He was 50 years old. Gil is a graduate of the class of 1999 of the Koret School of Veterinary Medicine, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Following his graduation, he opened the Vet Holim Veterinary Clinic in Kibbutz Kiryat Anavim together with his longtime friend, Dr Hilik Marom. But after working in the clinic for two years Gil felt that “he wants more from life”. At that time, I was looking for a PhD student for my laboratory, and thus Gil’s desire to expand to new horizons coincided perfectly with my search for a graduate student. I did not hesitate for a minute. From his days as a student in our school, I knew Gil as a hard-working, intelligent and devoted veterinarian; and just as importantly’ as a very pleasant and very friendly person with whom I would be very happy to work. When I interviewed him for the post I asked him why is he interested in a research career, and he replied “I don’t want to be an end user, I want to understand what I am doing”. I shall never forget this answer, which really defined Gil as a veterinarian and scientist who always

wanted to know, learn and understand more. And indeed Gil fulfilled the expectations that both of us had of him. He finished his PhD (on the electrophysiology of glaucoma) with eight original research papers that were published in leading scientific, 12 abstracts in international meetings (three of which won awards at those meetings) and eight abstracts in national meetings.

The years that Gil devoted to ophthalmic research in my laboratory made it clear to him that he found the love of his life (in addition to Anna, Roni and Noam, who were his true loves). Thus, upon finishing his PhD in 2006 he travelled to the University of Florida (where I studied 15 years earlier) where he completed a residency program and became a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists. As befitting someone who was a teacher and researcher at heart, Gil chose an academic career and joined the faculty of Iowa State University where he worked for nine years. A year ago he moved to Cornell University where he served as an Associate Professor at the time of his sudden death.

I could go on writing about Gil’s many academic achievements. He trained numerous students, veterinarians and residents in veterinary ophthalmology. He published another 34 research papers (on top of the eight published during his PhD), mostly on ophthalmic drugs and therapeutics. He frequently lectured in international meetings, served as President of the International Society of Veterinary Ophthalmology, and in the coming months two books that he co-edited will be published.

But alongside the “dry” biographical facts, what most impressed me about Gil is how he “conquered the world” and the number of people he touched during his professional career. During the first 48 hours after his death I received more than a 100 e-mails, WhatsApp messages and telephone calls from friends and colleagues who contacted me to ask what had happened and to express their condolences. It was

touching, heartwarming and impressive to see this worldwide show of love. I received e-mails from every corner of Europe and the USA, as well as Mexico, Brazil, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Taiwan, India... all testimony to how many people appreciated Gil as a veterinary ophthalmologist, teacher and researcher. And more importantly, how much they loved Gil as a person.

In a way, I was less struck by the messages of people who knew him well and worked with him in Florida, Iowa or New York. If you were close to Gil, you would love him. That's a given. I was more struck by how people who were not close to Gil, people who had met him a few times a year in a conference or committee, spoke about him. Even though they barely knew him, he touched them deeply.

I want to quote two letters I received. The first is from an American colleague who wrote: "I am so heart broken. He has been with me in my clinic. Our clinic Maltese who does not like men, LOVED him. The Maltese would follow Gil around everywhere and sit on his lap.

He so loved his family. He was proud of his daughters and the achievements of his wife.

The last time we met was at the ACVO conference in Hawaii. I was complimenting him on his work. He stopped me and said I was just being silly. He grabbed me and gave me a bear hug."

And on the other hand, a mail I received from a veterinarian in Indonesia who met Gil just once in her life and wrote "Two years ago I met an ophthalmologist from Iowa State University at the WSAVA Congress in Singapore. He was a very friendly and compassionate person with a charismatic smile. I told him that I really want to be an ophthalmologist. He said he will be glad to help me, and encouraged me to pursue my dream." This really sums up Gil. He not only pursued his own dreams, he also helped others pursue their dreams.

On Tuesday, Oct 27th 2020, Gil was laid to rest in the Jerusalem mountains that he loved so much. May he rest in peace.

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