

# ACADEMIC 'DESCENDANT' OF PROF. LIEBERMAN

By Vijay Mehrotra

*Darkness is setting in outside the Terman Engineering Center. I am sitting on the floor outside the OR Department chairman's office, head buried in my hands. My face is red, and my heart is beating faster than normal. I have just been told that I have failed a Ph.D. qualifying exam, and I am close to tears.*

*I do not notice the tall figure that approaches, or the long shadow that it casts, but I hear the voice. "Come into my office. I want to talk to you." It is Jerry Lieberman.*

*"This is not a big deal," says the grandfatherly professor. "You'll study, you'll take the exam again, and you'll pass. Don't worry." And with this thoughtful personal encouragement – simple words that mean so much to a struggling graduate student – he sends me on my way.*

Though we spent five years in the same department, I did not know Jerry Lieberman particularly well. Yet when I heard the news of his passing, I had a sense that a part of me had died with him. His influence on my academic experience was manifold.

There would probably not have been an Operations Research Department at Stanford without Jerry's clear vision and sustained efforts. University records show that he was the first chairman of Operations Research and played an instrumental role in the creation of the department. What these records don't tell you is that he was the glue, undoubtedly the only guy with the personality, the credibility and the integrity to bring together a talented group with disparate personal styles and the leadership to keep it together.

What these records also don't tell you is how he fought to make sure that graduate students were able to get funding, something that my peers and I benefited from directly and likely didn't appreciate enough. It is a fitting tribute that there are now fellowships for doctoral students at Stanford that bear his name.

Support comes in different shapes and sizes. In trying to get Internet connections for student offices in 1990, I ran into a surprising amount of inertia from the department faculty. Eventually, I was able to push through the initiative, but only Jerry had stood up in support of the idea. [I owe you big for that one, Jerry, and also for the confidence you showed in me while I toiled away on my research.]

I am a direct academic "descendant" of Professor Lieberman, for my dissertation advisor was Fred Hillier, who in turn had been Jerry's student. What is well known is their extraordinary professional relationship: Jerry was Fred's freshman advisor, undergraduate advisor, graduate advisor, dissertation advisor, co-author and faculty colleague. Also well documented is their shared fanaticism about sports.

But in talking to Fred recently, he pointed out something less obvious. "Jerry was my senior colleague, and already an established author. Nevertheless, from the beginning of the project, Jerry insisted that we be treated in all respects as equals." Which is

## AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Gerald J. Lieberman died at his home on the Stanford campus on May 18 of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease). (See page 61.) He was 73. His illness had gradually sapped Jerry of his famously abundant energy, rendered him incapable of speech, and confined him to his bed for the past several years. Nevertheless, this is a sad time for all of us who knew Jerry. This column is dedicated to him.

why we don't refer today about "the celebrated Lieberman and Hillier 'Introduction to Operations Research textbook,' " but rather the "the celebrated Hillier and Lieberman." Put in the same position, how many of us would have had this level of decency and fairness? Speaking of The Book, consider how forward thinking these guys really were. In the early 1960s, OR was

still a nascent and little-known discipline. By investing their time and energy into creating a well-marked doorway, this book really opened up the world of operations research to a much broader audience. To date, several hundred thousand copies of its many editions have been used by not only operations research and management science students, but also by MBAs, actuaries, engineers, statisticians, accountants and people from many other walks of life. There is simply no denying the fact that "for tens of thousands of students, faculty and practitioners around the world, Jerry Lieberman is operations research." [1]

I had studied the Hillier and Lieberman textbook prior to coming to Stanford, but really had little awareness of its significance. As a graduate student, however, I was quickly confronted with the academic research perspective, which regards such survey books as being of little real value.

And then one day Tom Cook came into town to give a department seminar. Dr. Cook was already one of my heroes, an academic turned management consultant turned airline industry executive/management science champion. When he was asked about what training he thought was most important for success in industry, his answer was both direct and surprising.

"Give me someone who really understands the Hillier and Lieberman book and who can communicate well with people, and I can almost guarantee you that they will make a big contribution to our company," said the head of operations research at American Airlines. But no bigger than the one that Jerry himself made to our profession.

In honor of you, Jerry, I'm taking the rest of the day off. ♦

Reference: 1. 1997, Kimball Medal citation.

## For more about Jerry Lieberman:

- "Probability in the Engineering and Information Sciences," Vol. 9, No. 1, Cambridge University Press, 1995 (a special volume dedicated to Jerry on his 70th birthday).

- Hillier, Frederick S. and Gerald J. Lieberman, "Introduction to Operations Research," (6th ed.), McGraw Hill, New York, 1995.

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