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Planting trees whose fruit we will never eat

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Posted: Tuesday, September 15, 2015 12:00 am

By VICTORS. SIERPINA

The week before last, I made a house call to Robert, a patient on hospice. He was listless, semi-comatose, with pinpoint pupils from the morphine, and yellow as a gourd from cancer-related liver failure. His devoted wife, along with friends, family, and the hospice care team were keeping him as comfortable as possible as he transitioned from life after a decadelong courageous battle with colon cancer.

Even after spending some time with him talking, examining, reading, praying, I wasn't quite sure he could hear or understand me. At that point, I started to feel like I had done what I could for him. Now I was there for his family.

This was a special man who had fought his hardest, had created a cancer survivor support group, and who was dying at a prematurely young age. He kept going to his work as a scientist at a local university up until about 2 weeks before his death. Yes, he could only last a few hours at the lab, but his study of sargassum seaweed was his passion and gave his life meaning and purpose until the end. He also played a huge role in the education of the students he mentored. Like his love of planting fruit-bearing trees, he planted seeds of scholarly inquiry, motivated them, and challenged them to achieve more.

More than a little choked up and tearful at the end of my visit, I was ready to leave. His wife, however, kindly invited me to see his garden. We slipped out the back door past a softly bubbling fountain and koi pond with a dozen or so brightly colored fish flashing in the water. In a plot of ground not much bigger than my arm span and just a few dozen feet long, we entered a cool, shaded area with lush fruit trees bearing oranges, avocados, grapefruit, limes, mangos, bananas, and apples. Most of the trees were 15 to 20 feet tall, healthy and well. There was a cleverly designed drip system for the trees and for raised vegetable beds in which the summer's last tomato plants were barely hanging on.

At the far end of the row of trees, near the alley, was a newly planted apple tree that barely came up to my waist. It was doing well but was obviously years from bearing a crop.

What occurred to me as I looked at this baby fruit tree was that Robert had planted this in the last year of his life, knowing that he would never sit under it or taste its crispy apples. He planted it for those coming after him, his family, friends, and community. What a generous and kind gesture, just like the man himself: generative, caring, and optimistic to the end.

So here are some life lessons he taught all of us:

1. Do your work as well as you can, as long as you can
2. Never, never give up



3. Leave something of value for those that follow after you
4. Be a role model
5. Plant trees of whose fruit you will never eat or under whose shade you will never sit

The Capt. Robert Webster SEAS Endowed Scholarship has been created in his honor at Texas A&M University. For information, call Alice Maffay at TAMUG, 409-740-4446.

Dr. Victor S. Sierpina is the WD and Laura Nell Nicholson Family Professor of Integrative Medicine and Professor of Family Medicine at UTMB.

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