Five guys named Moe: A tribute to Moe Bergman

Five Guys Named Moe is a British musical that garnered many honors. It was not about Moe Bergman, but the name of the musical is a metaphor for Moe. He was an unpretentious mover and shaker who made major contributions in several different areas. He had an amazing ability in addressing a difficult problem to demonstrate personality traits that were appropriate for the task at hand. On many occasions, he demonstrated an ability to address several diverse problems simultaneously with the same relentless drive. It was almost as if he were several beings in one body. This tribute identifies five major accomplishments that were achieved by Moe where each accomplishment required a very different way of doing things.

Moe Bergman, compassionate soldier

Moe served in the United States Army from 1943 to 1946. He was initially assigned to the signals corps where he acquired a basic knowledge of electronics during his pre-induction training. Once in the army, he was deeply moved by the plight of returning soldiers with severe hearing damage and the lack of appropriate rehabilitation services for them. It is not wise for a soldier in the ranks to write to the top brass directly, but Moe was not one to be daunted by mere formalities. He wrote to the Surgeon General in Washington, offering his services “to work with soldiers with hearing impairment.”

The letter was received at an opportune time. The army was aware of the rapidly growing number of soldiers with severe hearing damage and was in the process of setting up three aural rehabilitation clinics in different regions of the country. Moe was assigned to help set up the clinic at the Hoff General Hospital in Santa Barbara. From the army’s perspective, Moe’s qualifications for the task were unique and appropriate. Aural rehabilitation, such as it was at that time, was performed by teachers of speech correction, many of whom taught deaf children. Moe had an MA degree in speech correction and was a practicing teacher of speech correction when America joined the war. The army had state-of-the-art electronic equipment that could be used for hearing measurement and rehabilitation. Speech correction teachers, however, were not trained in the use of electronic equipment, but Private Moe Bergman, a teacher of speech correction, had already taken a pre-induction course in electronics for the signal corps. He was also a self-starter, as was evident from the letter he wrote to the Surgeon General and, most importantly, he was deeply concerned with the plight of injured soldiers and had the skills to help. Hence his re-assignment to develop an aural rehabilitation program at one of the three hearing clinics being set up by the army. The pioneering work performed at these three clinics laid the foundation for modern audiology. Moe was in the forefront of this endeavor together with other leading figures, including Ira Hirsh, Raymond Carhart, Grant Fairbanks, and others.

Moe Bergman, educator and dreamer

After his tour of duty in the army, Moe moved to the Veterans Administration where he became the chief audiologist. In 1953 he entered academe. Moe had a long abiding interest in education and a professorship at Hunter College of the City University of New York provided him with a new challenge. He also had dreams of making a major contribution to education. An opportunity to pursue this dream occurred in the early 1960s. Prior to 1961, there were several public colleges in New York City funded by the city. Brooklyn College, City College, Hunter College, Queens College were some of the more well-known colleges. The colleges operated independently with a substantial redundancy in academic offerings. This was an inefficient arrangement and in 1961 the city merged the many colleges supported by public funds into a single university thereby creating the largest urban university in the United States. The City University of New York (CUNY) today consists of 24 colleges with an enrollment of over 500 000 students.

Unlike the state-wide university systems of California and New York State, which were even larger, all of the colleges of the City University of New York were within a subway ride of each other.

Moe was quick to realize the potential of this arrangement. His dream was to form a central doctoral program that would be fed by the best graduates of the master’s level programs at the constituent colleges. Further, this central program would involve doctoral level students only, thereby serving as a magnet for outstanding faculty. Moe had also benefitted substantially from the diversity of his own education, and he was a strong believer in an interdisciplinary approach to audiology, particularly at the doctoral level. He campaigned hard to establish a university-wide doctoral program.
encompassing audiology, hearing science, speech science, speech and language pathology, and relevant aspects of linguistics, such as language development. There were many who opposed Moe’s vision, either because they believed that a doctoral program distributed over several colleges would be impractical, or because the audiology and speech-language pathology programs at individual colleges felt threatened by a new centralized behemoth with non-clinicians at the helm. The indefatigable Moe nevertheless pressed on carefully building up a consensus for the new program. In 1965 Moe became the first Executive Officer of the newly formed Doctoral Program in Speech and Hearing Sciences. The name was later changed to be more inclusive; the program is now known as the Doctoral Program in Speech-Language-Hearing Sciences.

The first few years were difficult, but Moe rode out the storm. He was insistent that the doctoral faculty include scientists with impeccable credentials and that students with an audiology or hearing science background be required to take courses in speech and/or speech-language pathology and students with a speech science or speech-language pathology background be required to take courses in audiology or hearing science. The emphasis on interdisciplinary studies did not sit well with the older generation of purists who wanted their students to know more and more about less. Moe nevertheless persisted. Within his own area of expertise, he pressed for a greater emphasis on rehabilitation and that diagnostic testing and fitting hearing aids were only introductory stages of the rehabilitation process and that rehabilitation is the underlying driving force of audiology. After all, it was the urgent need for aural rehabilitation in World War II that gave birth to the field of audiology.

By the end of his three-year term as Executive Officer, Moe had established the viability of a centralized doctoral program despite intense parochial opposition. He was also successful in attracting several leading researchers and clinicians to the program who continued to build on Moe’s vision. There was, however, a weak link in that the program did not have a single central appointment to provide the focus and leadership for the program’s future development. In the last year of his tenure as Executive Officer, Moe and his supporters pulled off a coup by convincing the university administration to implement central appointments at the Graduate Center. A few years later the university implemented a hiring freeze, but central appointments at the Graduate Center were well established by then and Moe’s vision of an interdisciplinary doctoral program with hearing rehabilitation as a key component (on a par with speech and language rehabilitation) was a reality.

The doctoral program that Moe founded with the help of like-minded visionaries, soon matured into the leading program of its type in the country. In the years that followed, the doctoral program attracted students and faculty with backgrounds in psychology, linguistics, physiology, engineering, and computer science. An indication of the international reputation of the doctoral program was the steady flow of visitors and several joint projects with researchers from Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, New Zealand, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, Taiwan and the United Kingdom. During the thaw between the USA and the USSR and China, the State Department arranged for Russian and Chinese scientists in speech and hearing to visit the CUNY Doctoral Program in Speech and Hearing Sciences. More importantly, many of the country’s leading researchers, clinicians and educators in the areas of speech, language and hearing, including a fair number of deans, several provosts, and a few university presidents are graduates of the doctoral program. It was a blessing that Moe lived long enough to know of the great success of the doctoral program he founded.

Moe Bergman, researcher ahead of his time

Moe made pioneering research contributions in several areas. In the early 1960s, Moe and Samuel Rosen studied the hearing of the Mabaans, a people living in a remote region of southeast Sudan who had never been exposed to industrial noise. Their hearing thresholds were found to be significantly lower than the normal threshold of hearing. This finding raised several basic issues. Were the lower thresholds due to their complete lack of exposure to industrial noise, or were diet, hereditary, or other factors the most likely cause? There have been follow up studies by several research groups, but the issue remains unresolved. This was Moe’s first involvement in basic research and, as in his other endeavors, he was an initiator, and in this case he helped open up a new area of investigation.

Moe is most well-known for his research on age-related reduction in speech perception. The conventional wisdom at the time he initiated his research was that the reduction in speech perception with increasing age was a result of reduced auditory sensitivity with increasing age. In 1976, Moe published a landmark paper in which he showed that seniors with clinically normal hearing also demonstrated reduced speech perception with age. Further, the age-related reduction in speech perception increased significantly under challenging listening conditions, such as listening to speech in noise, or in reverberation, or against competing speech. He also examined the effect of other distortions such as speeded speech, interrupted speech, and spectral distortions. Of the various speech distortions considered in the study, temporal distortions of the speech signal resulted in the largest age-related reductions in speech perception. Based on these observations, Moe postulated that the decrease in speech perception with age was associated primarily with a reduction in neural processing beyond the cochlea and that normal age-related reduction in auditory sensitivity at the periphery was a secondary factor. Recent advances in neurophysiology have provided strong support for Moe’s insightful postulate 40 years ago. These studies have shown substantial age-related deficits in auditory neural processing, particularly with respect to reduced temporal processing.

Moe’s research on speech perception as a function of age involved more than a decade of effort and he was able, towards the end of the project, to compare predictions of age-related reductions in speech perception based on cross-sectional data with observed longitudinal data on the subjects tested a decade earlier. There are few aging studies that have done this.

A third area of research of great interest to Moe was the interference of first language on second language speech perception. The interference was substantial even for people who were fluent in the second language for many years. These findings have important implications for second language learning.

Moe Bergman, practical idealist

Moe was a practical idealist. He was not the type of idealist who lived in an ivory tower. He was actively involved in pursuing his ideals even if the pursuit involved risks, discomfort, and danger. He was appalled at the treatment of his Jewish brethren in Europe during World War II and he did his best to help. He was quick to enlist in the army and use his skills as efficiently as possible.
In 1950, while attending the First International Course in Audiology in Stockholm, Moe was approached by doctors from the newly formed state of Israel who asked for help in educating audiologists in the new state. Moe believed strongly in the State of Israel as the ancestral home of the Jewish people and its role in providing refuge for those who had survived the holocaust as well as refugees from Arab countries and the Soviet Union. He immediately agreed. Funds were difficult to come by, but he managed to raise sufficient funds to travel to Israel where he lectured around the country. He soon discovered the woeful lack of audiology services in Israel and decided to do something about it. He returned several times in the years that followed establishing audiology clinics in different regions of the country for both Jewish and Arab Israelis. He also cajoled audiology equipment manufacturers in the United States with whom he had some influence to help in this effort. In addition, he arranged for Israeli audiology students to study in the United States and the City University of New York has had a steady stream of audiology students from Israel ever since.

Moe and several other far sighted leaders were the founding fathers of audiology in the United States. Moe repeated this performance some ten years later in Israel, this time single-handedly. Today, he is revered as the father of audiology in Israel.

Life in Israel is not nearly as comfortable as the United States. There is an ongoing struggle with Israel’s militant neighbors and there is always the possibility of another war. Moe nevertheless felt very deeply about Israel as the ancestral home of his people and its ongoing role of providing a haven for Jews who are unwelcome in other countries. Moe was committed to living the rest of his life in Israel despite the hardship and danger. In 1975, Moe and his wife Hannah immigrated to Israel. He accepted a professorship in the Sackler School of Medicine, Tel-Aviv University where he remained active and as ebullient as ever until his passing.

Moe Bergman, the man

Moe was his own man. He did not seek trouble, but he knew how to stand up to trouble makers. When he believed in something, he pursued it relentlessly with unlimited energy. He was far sighted and a dreamer at times, but as the preceding paragraphs attest, he pursued his dreams and transformed them to reality. Dream conversion is no easy task, but Moe had the drive, the ability, and dogged determination to succeed. He accomplished many great things in his life. Yet, despite his many successes and the accolades that followed, Moe never lost his simple charm. Moe was gloriously indisposed to formality. The trappings and snobbery of academe were not for him. Moe lived up to his name. He was not Moses or Montefiore Bergman. He was simply Moe to one and all. Therein lay the true Moe.

A diamond has many facets, each providing a brilliant view of its inner beauty. The five facets of Moe described above are a few of many positive aspects of Moe and his many achievements. He will be greatly missed.

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