

## Daniel Carleton Gajdusek (1923-2008)

*Folia Neuropathol* 2009; 47 (2): 87-88

Genius is sometimes difficult, often complicated, and always fascinating, and is nowhere better illustrated than in the life of Carleton Gajdusek, who died of heart failure on December 12, 2008, at the age of 86.

Born in Yonkers, New York, in 1923, he was two years older than his only sibling, Robin Gajdusek, the children of an immigrant Slovak father and Hungarian mother. Their father was an earthy entrepreneur and their mother a cultivated aristocrat, and from an early age it was evident that both boys had exceptional talents and boundless enthusiasm, which in due course led to distinguished careers in English literature for Robin and neuroscience for Carleton.

His contributions to the scientific literature spanned many fields, most notably in immunology, infectious diseases, and neurology, including studies of measles, herpesviruses, influenza, rabies, *Pneumocystis carinii*, acute hemorrhagic fevers, lymphocytic choriomeningitis, hantaviruses, arthropod-borne viruses, the amyotrophic lateral sclerosis-Parkinson's dementia complex in Guam and West Iran, Alzheimer's disease, and of course the group of diseases for which he is best known – transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE). His successful studies of the experimental transmission of these latter diseases began with kuru in the Highlands of New Guinea, and was followed in turn by Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, Gerstmann-Sträussler-Scheinker disease, and fatal familial insomnia, and it was for his demonstration of the infectious nature of what had been considered as iatrogenic neurodegenerations that he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics and Medicine in 1976.

The irony of his professional career is that he was far more interested in the scientific basis of human development and cultural diversity than in the better-funded field of neurological disease. This aspect of his thinking was beautifully presented in an early paper entitled "The composition of musics for man, or deco-

ding from primitive cultures the scores for human behavior" (1964), and many years later (2006) in a series of lectures at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm. He brought scores of boys and girls from New Guinea and the Western Pacific to his home in Maryland, not (in his own words) from any altruistic instinct but rather for the affection he felt for them, and the intellectual and emotional challenge of watching youngsters from isolated primitive cultures adapt to the Western world. He supported and raised these children through their adolescent years, and then watched most of them succeed in their adult years, either staying in the US, or returning to their Pacific origins. He formally adopted the first boy (Ivan Mbagintao) whom he brought from the Stone Age Anga people of the New Guinea Highlands; those who followed were legally his wards but he treated all of them as his sons (and the girls who came later as his daughters).

It is not widely known that Carleton was gifted in physics and mathematics as well as anthropology and medicine, and his acquaintance with the leaders in all of these fields reads like a Who's Who in Science. Among the many eminent scientists and clinicians who recognized his talent and furthered his career, perhaps none was more important than the microbiologist Dr. Joseph Smadel, who died just a few years after persuading him to transfer his activities from the Walter Reed Army Medical Center to the National Institutes of Health, where he spent the remaining decades of his professional career overseeing the Laboratory of Central Nervous System Studies with his long-time friend and colleague, Dr. Joe Gibbs. It is hardly necessary to recount the impact of his research on a wide variety of biological sciences, and his influence on hundreds of contemporary and younger colleagues. Everything he touched was brightened by his passion and intellect. Carleton left the NIH in 1996, and true to his lifelong peripatetic lifestyle, established a pied-à-terre in Amsterdam, with frequent

extended visits to Norway, France, China, and shorter visits to a host of other destinations in both Europe and Asia. He received a continuous stream of visitors in Amsterdam, including many of the children he had raised, and a dwindling number of older colleagues who were still alive. He sometimes telephoned his friends lamenting the death of yet another, younger, colleague he regretted having outlived, and he also outlived his brother, his Chinese wife and their son, his adopted son, and several of his foster children. Many times he described the last (and most tranquil) decade of his life as his 'bonus years'.

Like many of the men and women of genius who came before him, he was bigger than life, with bigger appetites, passions, virtues and flaws than those who surrounded him, and he has left a massive record of that life in his journals, on which he continued to labor to the very end. At the conclusion of another dramatic life, it was said 'The oldest hath borne most. We that are young shall never see so much nor live so long', and we who loved Carleton echo that same sense of awe and affection for our remarkable friend.

Paul Brown, M.D.