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- [Announcements](#)
- [News](#)
- [Events](#)
- [In the News »](#)
- [Research](#)
- [In Class](#)
- [Alumni](#)
- [Submit an Article](#)

Topics

- [Themes](#)
- [Becoming Human](#)
- [Food Studies](#)
- [Fire to iPhone](#)
- [Knowing the Future](#)
- [Love and Hate](#)
- [Making and Breaking the Law](#)
- [Sense of Place](#)
- [Sustainability Studies](#)
- [War & Peace](#)
- [Wealth and Poverty](#)
- [Congrats!](#)
- [Global](#)
- [Internships](#)

Links

- [Ohio University](#)
- [College of Arts & Sciences](#)
- [A&S Departments](#)
- [OHIO Compass](#)
- [OHIO Today](#)
- [Perspectives](#)

[Alumni News](#)

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Plant Biology Alumni, Faculty, Students Honor Cohn at Research Symposium



Foreground: Anne Sternberger, Ph.D. student, presents research to alumni Drs. Thomas and Chenzhao Vierheller

*By MC Tilton
PACE Writer*

Ohio University [Environmental & Plant Biology](#) alumni, faculty and students gathered Sept. 9 to honor the late Dr. Norman S. Cohn, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, at the [Norman S. Cohn Research Symposium](#).

The daylong symposium included presentations on current plant cell and molecular biology research by alumni, faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, as well as a period of reflection and remembrance of Cohn. The poster session showcased current laboratory work of graduate and undergraduate student on topics as diverse as mitochondrial genome of algae to seedlings in space to the biochemistry of plant cell walls.



Dr. Bob Goldberg discusses his research.

“The opportunity for all of us to gather together today in Dr. Cohn’s memory reminds me of the power of bringing cross generational groups together, including the space-making for undergraduates to get involved in research that was so important to him,” said College of Arts & Sciences [Dean Robert Frank](#) in his opening remarks.

Following Cohn's passing in June 2016, alumni **Bob Goldberg**, **Ralph Quatrano**, and **Dean DellaPenna Jr.** sought a way to honor Cohn's lifelong impact on their plant biology careers. They endowed a [**Norman S. Cohn Research Fellowship in Plant Cell and Molecular Biology**](#) for undergraduate summer research. The first recipient of this fellowship was senior **Stacy Welker**, who works with [**Dr. Allan Showalter**](#), Professor of Environmental & Plant Biology.



From left: Dr. Bob Goldberg, Dr. Ralph Quatrano, Stacy Welker, Dr. Dean DellaPenna, and Dr. Morgan Vis

“I was able to really focus on my work this summer thanks to the donors’ generosity,” said Welker, whose research centers on the function of specific sugars and enzymes within arabinogalactan proteins in the cell wall. “I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go to graduate school or be a presenter, and now that I’ve had this fellowship I know that I not only can do it, but that I enjoy it.”

Cohn's Greatest Legacy

Many who worked with Cohn see this commitment to student research opportunities as his greatest legacy.

“The mentorship of students that Dr. Cohn upheld is an integral part of advancing our research mission, and giving them opportunities can be truly transformative in their careers,” said Vice President of Research **Joe Shields**. “I regarded him as a significant role model, and his commitment to helping students is something to aspire to.”



Dr. Sarah Wyatt talks about her experiment on the International Space Station.

Some of the current research presented at the event included gravitational response research from seedlings that have been to the International Space Station by Dr. Sarah Wyatt. Alumna Dr. Jie Yang presented her studies of the microbial enzyme laccase and its ability to degrade environmental pollutants. As well, alumna Dr. Debarati Basu discussed her work on how internal and external stressors affect ion channels in Arabidopsis plants.



Participants continue the discussion at lunch.

Many warm stories of Cohn's humor, intellect, frankness, and stellar stage talent were shared in the final session of the symposium.

Fellowship donor and alum DellaPenna said that he was a first-generation college student, and Cohn did him the biggest favor of his career. Now DellaPenna involves other first-generation college students in his own lab as much as possible. Fellow donor and alum Goldberg added that Cohn set the standard for him of what it means to be a great faculty member and academic. And donor and alum Quatrano agreed that every plant biology student should remember that they, too, have the power to make as deep an impact as Cohn did on the three of them.





"It's so humbling to be among these faculty, Emeriti faculty, students, and alumni at this symposium, and it reminds me of the amazing things that this dynamic department with people like Dr. Cohn in it can do," said Dr.

[Morgan Vis](#), Professor and Chair of Environmental & Plant Biology. “All the student-professional interaction and networking that happened today is just what he would have wanted.”

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