

1994

Charles A. Miller

Longtime ASCB member Charlie Miller, purveyor of research for many fellow Society members, recently retired after serving 33 years with the National Institute of General Medical Sciences of the NIH. Miller began his long and distinguished career at the NIH in 1961, a couple of years before NIGMS was created, as Health Scientist Administrator in the Research Grants Branch. At the time of his retirement, Miller was Director of NIGMS' Cellular and Molecular Basis of Disease Program Branch, a position he had held since 1973. During his early career, Miller was head of the Biophysical Sciences Section of the Research Training Grants Branch. In 1972, he was named NIGMS Associate Director for Research Manpower as well as Special Assistant to the NIGMS Director, a position he held through 1983.

Miller's straightforwardness and dedication to the life sciences has earned the admiration of those who have worked with him. George Palade has observed that Charlie Miller is highly regarded and much appreciated by his scientific constituency in the Division of Cellular and Molecular Basis of Disease at NIGMS. He had both respect and understanding for researchers dealing with his program. He served rather than administered science and, on this account, scientists considered him a close supporting friend, rather than a distant, detached administrator. Former ASCB President Tom Pollard remembers Miller's unfailing good humor and wonderful way that he can put scientists, administrators, and students at ease. Another former President, Marc Kirschner, calls Miller the finest in a long tradition of NIH administrators at NIGMS who have helped build our great postwar biomedical research enterprise. 1994 ASCB President Dick McIntosh calls Miller a central figure in the development of American cell biology. He recognized the value of an integrated approach to cell study, based upon a combination of morphology and biochemistry/molecular biology... Initially, he supported the investigators who founded American cell biology, and subsequently, he nurtured much of the science that grew from their pioneering work. Through his program, he has helped to fund some of the best research in cell biology that has been done, not only in this country, but throughout the world.

Miller joined the ASCB in the mid-1960s when he recognized the overlap of disciplines funded by NIGMS that were represented within the ASCB. For Miller, the ASCB has come to represent the leading scientific and intellectual diversity of modern biology, which closely parallel the interdisciplinary basic science nature of the NIGMS. It is this vitality that Miller feels typifies the ASCB. Miller has attended virtually every ASCB Annual Meeting, including the First International Congress on Cell Biology in Boston, which he vividly remembers as one that especially contributed to the growing vigor and strength of the Society. Miller hopes to see friends and colleagues at the Annual Meeting in San Francisco this month.

A strong advocate of increasing the number of minority students of science, Miller's work led to the creation of the Minority Access to Research Careers (MARC) Program, a minority research training program. ASCB's Secretary George Langford notes that

Charlie was one of the most vocal advocates at NIH for programs designed to bring members of underrepresented groups into the biomedical sciences. It was through Charlie's leadership that the NIH established very successful and important programs like MARC and MBRS. Charlie did more than establish programs, he met with minority scientists and provided advice on how to negotiate the process of applying for an NIH grant. These efforts were vitally important to all of us who benefited from his kindness and friendship. Following Charlie's example, I hope support for minority scientists and programs like MARC and MBRS continue at the NIH. Miller believes that all scientific societies must do more to foster popular writings and special programs for newspapers, television, and other media, and to educate science writers on new discoveries. Although he feels that young investigators should not be discouraged, Miller thinks that the ASCB, other scientific societies, and universities need to encourage students to consider alternative careers such as teaching or the biotechnology industry to provide a better balance among a variety of job opportunities. For his part, Miller modestly thinks that he has made no greater contribution than many other dedicated staff members at the NIH. But Langford notes that Miller has worked harder than anyone I know to maintain adequate funding for basic research at the NIH. With his incredible energy, he was able to stay on top of new developments in several fields including cellular and molecular biology. He accomplished this through a variety of means but especially through constant interactions with scientists at national meetings such as the Annual Meeting of the ASCB. I always looked forward to seeing him at the ASCB meeting and to sharing his excitement over new developments in the field. While Miller fully recognizes the fantastic knowledge acquired in recent years through research, he says, we have only begun to understand the intricate functions and malfunctions of cells.

Miller is a native of Winchester, Indiana, and received his Ph.D. in biology and biochemistry from Indiana University. His professors included two Nobel Laureates, Salvador Luria and Herman J. Muller. A World War II airman from 1943-1945, Miller was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for 35 missions over Nazi Germany. Among his civilian awards are the American Society for Biochemistry & Molecular Biology Distinguished Service Associates Award, the DHEW Superior Service Honor Award, the US Department of Health & Human Services Merit Award, and the Senior Executive Service Award.

Now that Miller is retired, he plans to spend the next month or two just taking it easy, reading, traveling, and looking at some other professional opportunities. He and his wife Polly have four sons and four grandsons.