On 11 December 2006, the life of an outstanding paleoecologist, teacher, administrator, husband, father, and friend came to a tragic end. Richard R. Alexander, or Alex as his friends called him, was taking a brief vacation with his wife, Jeannie, on the island of St. Lucia in the Caribbean. Alex decided to go for a swim in the ocean and in a freak accident was apparently dashed to the bottom by a wave, breaking his neck. News of his death stunned all of those who knew Alex as an energetic, vital, and accomplished person who contributed immensely to paleoecology and marine biology. He had been an outstanding faculty member and administrator at Rider University for over 25 years.

Alex was born in Covington, Kentucky, on 2 February 1946, just across the river from Cincinnati. He developed an interest in science and particularly geology at an early age. Being raised in the heart of the fossiliferous strata of the Upper Ordovician probably whetted his appetite for paleontology.

Alex pursued his undergraduate college studies at the University of Cincinnati where he earned a B.S. degree in geology in 1968. At Cincinnati, he completed a bachelor’s thesis on the paleoecological significance of foraminifera in the Cusseta Formation of Alabama. But Alex’s real interest was in macro-invertebrates, especially the brachiopods that were so common in the strata around Cincinnati. When he entered graduate school at Indiana University, he had already decided that he wanted to study the paleoecology of the Ordovician brachiopod, *Rafinesquina*. He first began his research under my colleague, Prof. Robert Shaver. Bob Shaver’s research interests were in ostracods and Silurian reefs, so he promptly advised Alex that Prof. Dodd might be a more appropriate advisor for his work on functional morphology in brachiopods. Bob Shaver often told me that I really owed him something for sending me one of the best students to ever earn a Ph.D. in paleontology from Indiana University. I had never done any research on Paleozoic brachiopods, but was eager to have Alex as a student. Alex and I decided that he would prepare a two-part dissertation. One part would be concerned with his favorite fossil, *Rafinesquina*, and the other part would be on functional morphology of two genera of Pliocene fossils from the Kettleman Hills of California. The resulting dissertation was titled “Autecological Studies of the Brachiopod *Rafinesquina* (Upper Ordovician), the Bivalve *Anadara* (Pliocene), and the Echinoid *Dendraster* (Pliocene).” This may have been a rather strange combination, but it was the basis for several publications early in Alex’s career. Alex conducted fieldwork in the Kettleman Hills of California for his research on the Pliocene fossils. One of my most enduring memories of Alex comes from when Bob Stanton and I, who were collecting in the area, came upon Alex with his rental car stuck in the loose sand in a dry wash
in a remote part of the hills. While at Indiana University, Alex took our Geology of Shallow Marine Environments class in the Florida Keys. Perhaps this experience gave him a taste of modern marine environments and marine biology, which were such important parts of Alex’s later career at Rider. But the most important thing to happen to Alex during his years at Indiana was meeting and marrying Jeannie, his wife of many years.

After earning his Ph.D. at Indiana in 1972, Alex joined the faculty at Utah State University. He was assistant professor and then associate professor there. During this time he published a number of papers on the paleoautecology of brachiopods, especially those he collected in the Rocky Mountain area. He also continued his interest in the Pliocene fossils of the Kettleman Hills and published papers with Bob Stanton and me on those fossils. It was also at this time that his interest in predation scars in Paleozoic brachiopods developed, a topic for which he is well known.

In January 1981, Alex moved to Rider University as an associate professor of geology, and in 1986 he was promoted to professor of geology. Alex’s leadership ability was soon recognized and he served as chair of the Department of Geological and Marine Sciences from 1983 to 1991 and 1993 until his death. He also served as an assistant dean in the College of Liberal Arts, Education, and Sciences from 1997 until 2006. Among his many accomplishments at Rider was his work in establishing field courses for Rider students at Shoals Marine Lab in Maine, the Bermuda Biological Station, and the Roatan Institute for Marine Sciences in Honduras. He also conducted research and supervised students at the Rider marine field station at Barnegat Bay in New Jersey. In spite of all his administrative duties and teaching he managed to pursue a very active research program. He continued his research on functional morphology of fossil brachiopods and predation and shell damage in their shells.

In the 1990s, his research increasingly focused on modern mollusks and experimental studies with aspects such as burrowing rates, substrate effects, predation, and hydrodynamics. One of his colleagues marveled that Alex could get excited about watching clams burrow (very, very slowly!). Alex declared that one advantage to working with clams was that at the end of the experiment you could “eat the evidence.” He also increasingly involved students in his research. Much of his later work was co-authored with students and involved experimental work in the marine environment.

Alex was an exemplary teacher. One of his students reported that Alex just “made learning fun.” Alex was a master of observation and taught his students to search for the important details. Alex was very supportive of his students, and in return they worked hard because they did not want to let him down. He was especially effective at instilling in his students a love of research. He advised numerous student research projects, many done at the field stations where he had helped to establish relationships.

With all of his activity as a researcher, teacher, and administrator, one wonders how Alex found any time for a family life. But he most certainly did. He and Jeannie gave their son, Curtis, and their daughter, Denise, a wonderful childhood. For example Alex helped coach Denise’s elementary school soccer team and attended numerous music competitions and band performances by his son. Alex shared his enthusiasm for the sea and its creatures with his family on vacations. He was justifiably proud of his children: his son earned a Ph.D. in meteorology and his daughter is an accomplished schoolteacher. I can testify that Curtis’s love of meteorology developed early. Alex and family were visiting us in Bloomington when a strong thunderstorm came rolling through. I have rarely seen a young man as excited as Curtis was by the flashing lightning and rolling thunder. In addition to raising a family, Alex somehow found time for reading, photography, and even writing sonnets for his wife. In later years he developed a passion for lighthouses and was active with the Lighthouse Education Center on Barnegat Bay.
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