

In memoriam – Dr David J. Galas

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David J. Galas was an internationally recognised expert in molecular biology and human genetics, well known for his work in the Human Genome Project. Less known is that he was also a highly gifted artist, both in writing poetry and as a painter. On 27 May, David Galas passed away following a determined battle with cancer.

Just over a decade ago, Dr Galas was instrumental in the creation of the Luxembourg Centre for Systems Biomedicine (LCSB) at the University of Luxembourg. Starting in 2009, he led the “Luxembourg project”, a strategic biotechnology initiative of the Luxembourg government, the University of Luxembourg and the Institute of Systems Biomedicine (ISB) in Seattle to establish the LCSB. Under the leadership of Lee Hood, the ISB was an international flagship in pioneering systems biology and the application of systems approaches to personalised medicine. It was David Galas who, together with Diane Isonaka, took responsibility for managing the project and assuring the successful knowledge-transfer from the ISB to the newly established LCSB. The LCSB is deeply thankful for his contribution to research in the Grand Duchy. “As the founder of the LCSB, I would like to express my gratitude for his role in launching our research centre and helping to shape it into what it is today,” says Prof. Rudi Balling, former director of the LCSB. “For me, David was more than a cooperation partner and a colleague. He was a true intellectual with an amazing analytical mind, kindness and a great sense of humour.”

David Galas received his PhD in Theoretical Physics from the University of California, Davis-Livermore (USA) in 1972. He became Senior Staff Scientist at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory but then decided to change fields to Molecular Biology. He became principal investigator in the Department of Molecular Biology at the University of Geneva (Switzerland, 1977-1981), held various academic positions including a Professorship and Chair in Molecular Biology at the University of Southern California (1981-1990) and was appointed Director for Biological and Environmental Research at the US Department of Energy (1990-1993). He was the founder, President and Chief Scientific Officer of Darwin Molecular Corporation (later Chiroscience R&D Inc.) from 1993 to 1998. After spending several years - including as Chancellor - at the Keck Graduate Institute of Applied Life Sciences in Claremont, California (1998-2005), he joined the ISB (2005-2012).

It was during his time as Senior Vice President for Strategic Partnerships at the ISB that David Galas worked along Luxembourgish and American collaborators to establish the LCSB. “His expertise was key when it came to getting the LCSB off the ground,” details Prof. Paul Wilmes, deputy director of the LCSB. “He helped us to build a fully-fledged interdisciplinary research centre, collaborated with us on several research projects, actively participated in the conferences we organised over the years and stayed on as a visiting professor and advisor to the LCSB until quite recently. I thoroughly enjoyed all my interactions with David, his intellect and sharpness left a real mark on me. I have many fond memories of our Skype calls together, when he was sitting in his study on Bainbridge Island near Seattle where he enjoyed balancing art with science.”

More recently, David Galas was Principal Scientist at the Pacific Northwest Research Institute, where he focused primarily on computational biology. After holding significant leadership positions in academia and being the founder or co-founder of five biotechnology companies, his contributions to science are numerous. He published around 180 scientific articles and issued patents, and invented several key technologies, such as DNase footprinting, a method still widely used today. He also discovered four important human genes including the first identified human gene that affects the human rate of aging and a gene affecting susceptibility to early onset Alzheimer’s disease. “We should celebrate his scientific achievements and aim to honour his legacy at the LCSB” states Prof. Michael Heneka, current director of the LCSB.

