

Michael Emerman wins McDougall mentorship award

Students, postdocs honor Fred Hutch scientist whose individualized teaching style fuels excitement about questions and process of discovering answers

Dec. 10, 2012 | By Brad Broberg

Dr. Michael Emerman makes no bones about his mentoring style. "I tell people who want to work in my lab that I won't give them the answers," Emerman said. "My role is to help them discover things on their own."

The students and fellows who work and study under Emerman—known to each other as Emermanos and Emermanites—appreciate that style. "At first, it would have been nice to have some answers, but in the long run, it's the kind of training I needed," said former graduate student Dr. Nisha Duggal. "That's why I wanted to work in Michael's lab. I knew I would learn how to figure things out on my own."

Emerman, a faculty member in the Human Biology Division at Fred Hutch, is the winner of the 2012 McDougall Faculty Mentoring Award. Presented by Fred Hutch's Student/Postdoc Advisory Committee, the award celebrates faculty members for their enthusiastic commitment to mentoring graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and medical fellows as they train to become scientists and plan their careers.

Unique award honors mentorship legacy of Jim McDougall

The award commemorates the late Dr. Jim McDougall, a founding member of the Basic Sciences Division and a highly regarded mentor during his 25 years at Fred Hutch. Emerman received the award—a custom bobblehead doll in his likeness and a bottle of McDougall's favorite scotch—at the annual SPAC holiday party Dec. 7.

"Mentoring is something I take very seriously and work hard at," said Emerman, whose research focuses on HIV. "The fact that people in my lab believe I'm a good mentor is very rewarding."

Duggal nominated Emerman for the award and collected letters of support from numerous other people he's trained and guided during his 23 years at Fred Hutch [see excerpts below].

Currently a postdoc at the Centers for Disease Control in Fort Collins, Colo., Duggal said Emerman taught her a lot about how to get back on track if an experiment produced a disappointing outcome. "Michael's approach is there is no bad data, just data, and there is always something positive you can take from it," Duggal said.

Although Emerman expects people to think for themselves, his door is always open and he makes a point to meet with each person in his lab every Monday. "I like to give people ownership of their projects, but that's how I keep them from getting too far off track," he said.

The Emerman Lab: A place for transformation

Emerman encourages people in his lab to interact wherever possible. For example, new students are assigned a bench in the middle of the lab to make it easy for them to ask questions. And everyone is expected to give feedback when someone makes a presentation.

"The best thing is when I walk in the lab and they're all talking about some result and they don't even look at me. That's what I want to see," he said.

Emerman originally planned to become an engineer, but a molecular biology class sparked a love for discovery and inspired him to become a scientist. "What I liked about research is exploring the unknown," he said. "You are free to find the problem and the answer."



Dr. Michael Emerman, Human Biology Division

Photo by Bo Jungmayer

Emerman's teaching reflects the style of one of his own mentors at the University of Wisconsin, Dr. Howard Temin, who won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1975 for his discoveries about RNA tumor virus. "He'd tell you if you were going in the wrong direction, but he'd never tell you what something meant," Emerman said. "He'd ask you what it meant and what you planned do to do next."

Emerman takes great satisfaction in the transformation that occurs from the time people join his lab until they leave. "In the beginning, I'm doing a lot of the talking, but in the end, I'm just listening," he said. "They're the experts."

Praise from Emermanos and Emermanites

"Your future career is the major concern for Michael from day one. His seemingly innocuous questions unavoidably lead you to facing the difficult career decisions: Where should I focus my efforts? What is most important for me in my work? What research directions can I claim as my own? Michael customizes his approach to each trainee based on their level of experience, personal character and future career aspirations. Everyone gets an individualized training program that best fits their needs."

— Dr. Yegor Veronin

"Michael always has the student's wellbeing in mind, despite operating in a competitive research field. In my experience, he provided the spark to fuel my scientific curiosities, allowing me to reach my own creative apex. For example, after I proposed an international research collaboration, he helped me forge a relationship that will likely extend into a postdoctoral fellowship in France."

— Dr. Alex Compton

"I always felt that Michael really cared about how I progressed in my career and I would not have achieved my scientific goals without his help. For instance, every significant grant or paper submission that I have asked for his comments are unfailingly returned to me within a few hours with insightful criticisms/comments. And, the criticisms are always spot on!

— Dr. Rahm Gummuluru

TAGS: fred hutchinson cancer research center, Human Biology, McDougall Mentoring Award, Michael Emerman

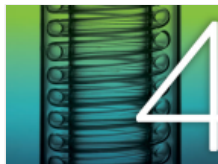
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