



Ronald L. Phillips

January 1, 1940 - August 25, 2023

Ronald L. Phillips

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It is with great sadness that the family of Ronald L. Phillips announce his passing on August 25, 2023. He was known as a loving and caring husband, father, mentor and friend whose life's mission was to improve agricultural production and alleviate hunger. He is survived by his loving wife of 61 years Judy Phillips, his son Brett Phillips (Diane), daughter Angela Phillips, and three grandchildren Leah (25), Jacob (22) and Jean-Luc (7). Ron was preceded in death by his parents Philemon and Louise, and his brother Keith.

He was born in 1940 on a farm in Huntington County, Indiana, and moved to Crawfordsville, Indiana, when he was 7. He earned his B.S. and M.S. degree from Purdue University and a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota, completing his postdoctoral training at Cornell University.

In 1967, he joined the faculty of the Department of Agronomy and Plant Genetics at the University of Minnesota and was there 42 years, retiring at age 70 as a Regents Professor, first McKnight Presidential Chair in Genomics, and Director of the Center for Microbial and Plant Genomics. He has published over 150 research papers, 70 chapters, 350 abstracts and 6 edited books. Research areas have included the molecular genetics of crop species, cell and tissue culture, gene mapping and genomics. He made significant improvements in protein quality, seed shattering resistance and other important traits. He is on the "Wall of Discovery" at the University of

Minnesota for the "first regeneration of complete corn plants from cells", a groundbreaking discovery that led to the development of genetically engineered crops.

During his 42 years on the University of Minnesota faculty, Ron mentored 55 graduate students and over 20 postdoctoral scientists. He considered the interaction with his students as his most important contribution and cherished their friendship. Ron credits the extraordinary efforts of the students and technicians for the reputation enjoyed by the Phillips' lab.

Ron was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1991. "Throughout his career, Dr. Phillips has coupled the techniques of plant genetics and molecular biology to enhance the understanding of basic biology of cereal crops and to improve these species by innovative methods" (NAS, 1991). At the inauguration, he signed the same book as Albert Einstein.

From 1996 to 1998, Ron was selected by Congress as Chief Scientist of the United States Department of Agriculture. As Chief Scientist, he was in charge of the National Research Initiative Competitive Grants Program. He also chaired the White House committee that wrote the Plant Genome Research Program requested by Congress.

In 2007, Ron was presented the Wolf Prize, which honors those who have "contributed to society through groundbreaking research for mankind", by the President of Israel at the Knesset.

Ron also served on the selection committee for The World Food Prize, established by Dr. Norman Borlaug, and as faculty of the World Food Prize Global Youth Institute for several years where he fostered the involvement of Minnesota youth in this life-changing program.

In addition, Ron was the recipient of the University of Minnesota's Distinguished Career Award, Crop Science Research Award, Medal for Science from the University of Bologna (Italy) and the University of Minnesota's Siehl Prize, "recognizing individuals who have made extraordinary contributions to the production of food and alleviation of hunger."

Ron served on the Program Advisory Committee of the Palm Oil Research

Institute of Malaysia for ten years, the Scientific Advisory Board of the Danforth Plant Science Center, the Board of Trustees of the International Rice Research Institute, serving as Chair of the Program Committee from 2005-2009, and as a Fellow of the Noble Foundation.

He was elected a Fellow of the American Society of Agronomy, Crop Science Society of America (and President), the American Association for the Advancement of Science as well as Chair of the Council of Scientific Presidents and founding member and Director of the Plant Molecular Genetics Institute.

Ron was honored to have the Hayes/Phillips Lecture named after him, to give keynote speeches at places such as the United Nations in Vienna, Austria, to be invited to present seminars or serve on advisory committees in over 30 countries, and to receive an Honorary doctorate from Purdue University. He was also the recipient of the Purdue Agriculture Distinguished Alumni Award as well as the R. Emerson Lifetime Maize Genetics Award, presented in 2021. When Ron wasn't traveling with Judy, you would find him congregating with friends from Centennial United Methodist Church, spending time with his family in Houston or San Diego, or boating and fishing in Minnesota. Ron was an inspiration to his kids, Brett and Angie. He was a shoulder to lean on and the person they would turn to for advice, knowing he would always guide them in the right direction. His love for Judy was unwavering.

Ron was dearly loved by all who knew him and will be greatly missed.

Suggested Memorial Contributions (in lieu of flowers):

Project AgGrad

Ron was especially passionate about Project AgGrad. Initiated by Ron and funded by contributions made through the United Methodist Church, Project AgGrad brings students from developing countries to the University of Minnesota to earn their graduate degree and then return home to conduct research and train others in agricultural production. The hope is that this

multiplier effect will help to alleviate hunger.

Project AgGrad Donation Link

Contributions to the program can also be sent to the Minnesota Conference office (122 W. Franklin Ave, Suite 400, Minneapolis, MN 55404) with "Project Ag-Grad 7005" written in the memo line.

The Ron and Judy Phillips Plant Genetics Scholarship Fund

Started in 2007 at the University of Minnesota by Ron and Judy Phillips, this fund provides funding for graduate fellowships in the Department of Agronomy in the College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences. This fund, to be matched by the 21st Century Graduate Fellowship Endowment, will support both the Ron and Judy Phillips Plant Genetics Fellowship and the Project AgGrad Fund.

Ron and Judy Phillips Plant Genetics Scholarship Fund Donation Link

Memorial Service will be held on Friday, September 8th at 11:00 A.M. at Centennial United Methodist Church; 1524 County Road C2 West, Roseville, MN. Luncheon to follow the service.

Tribute Wall

JN

“ *Ron Phillips was not only a stellar scientist but also a stellar human being. His contributions will last long into the future and he will serve as an excellent role model for young scientists to emulate.* ”

Jim Birchler and Kathy Newton - September 12, 2023 at 12:00 AM

FD

“ *I had the enormous privilege of working with Dr. Phillips when I was a faculty at the University of Minnesota. Not only he was an extraordinary scholar, but he had the upmost care for students and colleagues. He left a legacy in the lives of his students and his discoveries that helped food production. My most sincere condolence for his family and close friends.* ”

Francisco Diez - September 11, 2023 at 12:00 AM

SF

“ *It was indeed an honor to be associated with Ron, and will be missed dearly.* ”



Suresh Family - September 08, 2023 at 12:00 AM

TP

“ I first met Ron Phillips in the fall of 1989 when the limo his daughter Angie and I took with some other friends to our first sorority formal stopped at the Phillips home to take some photos (just like prom!). I of course didn't know then of any of his numerous life-changing career accomplishments to that point. I only had my first impression of him as a warm, gentle and humble family man. I have since come to see what a rich and fulfilling life he has lead, and what an incredible loss is felt in his passing. Prayers to my dear friend Angie, Judy, Brett, and all of Ron's family and friends who feel that loss most deeply. May your love and memories always bring you peace.



Teri Pullen - September 08, 2023 at 12:00 AM

JC

“ Judy & family,
We send our deep sympathies. Ron was a special friend and certainly a brilliant scientist! Our hearts are sad.
With our love and prayers. Jim & Bev

Jim & Bev Cook - September 08, 2023 at 12:00 AM

CF

“ Judy, Our deepest condolences on the passing of Ron. You and your family are in our thoughts and prayers.



Catharina Field - September 08, 2023 at 12:00 AM

NM

“ I was surprised and deeply saddened by the sudden passing of Dr. Phillips. In 1994, when I visited Minnesota, USA for the first time, he picked me up at the Minneapolis St. Paul airport and took me to his home near the Turtle Lake, where he kindly allowed me to stay overnight. He welcomed me, a complete stranger who knew neither right nor left, with a warmth as if I were family. I will never forget that night of his hospitality.

Naoki Mori - September 08, 2023 at 12:00 AM

SF

“ It was indeed an honor to have known Ron, and will be missed dearly.

Jayanti (Suresh family)

Suresh Family - September 08, 2023 at 12:00 AM

RT

“ My wife Kay and I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Ron and family both in professional and personal events, namely my Master's and Ph.D. in Ron's lab and our wedding which both Ron and Judy attended. We continued to stay in touch with them with our visits to the US both professionally and personally. We got together with both Ron and Judy many times in many places around the world for different scientific events.

Professionally, Ron was an astonishing visionary who always seemed to get it right, giving the credit to those who helped him in realizing and making his visions happen. My colleagues and I at the University of Bologna were honored by his visits to Italy to attend congresses as well as an award from the University of Bologna. Ron had the strongest influence on my professional career and how to approach complex and challenging issues. Personally, we enjoyed visiting with Ron and Judy and their family and we thought it was amazing that their home was a place where graduate students and colleagues could gather to discuss science and enjoy Judy's food as well as lake activities.

I attended Ron's course on cytogenetics and also had the honor and pleasure to meet Dr. Charles Burnham. Equally remarkable was Ron's enthusiasm and capacity to support and mentor international students in the Beachell-Borlaug Program that impacted so many worldwide. We always looked forward to meeting Ron and Judy at PAG each January in San Diego.

Ron had a wonderful and fulfilling life and will be greatly missed but at the same time will leave an enduring legacy.

Roberto Tuberosa (and Kay Stuart)

"There are special people in our lives who never leave us, even after they are gone" D. Morgan



Roberto Tuberosa - September 08, 2023 at 12:00 AM

CA

“Tears are welling in my eyes as I read these tributes and nod my head in agreement. My wife, Ginger, and I met in Ron's lab as grad students in 1983. He and Judy traveled in the snow to Madison, WI, to bless us with their presence at our wedding in 1988. He was not only a great scientific mentor, but also a role model for how to live life and treat others. Our deepest condolences to the Phillips' family and friends. His was indeed a life well-lived, and he will not be forgotten.



Chuck Armstrong - September 08, 2023 at 12:00 AM

GK

“Ron Philipps was a personal friend. We had a close association as fellow plant geneticists. we serves on many committees together. He always made very wise comments during committee meetings. We spend considerable amount of time together during his tenure as a member of IRRI Board Of trustees. I greatly benefitted from my association with him. I miss him dearly. Harwant and I send our deep condolences to Judy Phillips and other family members.

Gurdev S. Khush - September 07, 2023 at 12:00 AM

KO

“ Unlike so many writing here, we only have known Ron as a neighbor. And he has been the best neighbor we could have wished for. Ron and Judy have been the judges for the kids bicycle parades at neighborhood National Nights Out. Ron has always attended local school district fundraisers. He has been a ticket seller for Rotary Events. He has always supported the local community with grace and dignity. We have hosted him in our home, and he and Judy have hosted us. It won't be the same without him.

Judy, Brett and Angela: we know that you are grieving. We will be there with you to hold you in our hearts, thoughts, and prayers Friday and until you no longer need it. I will stop by with a hotdish in a week or so--when the hubbub has quieted, and you will need it.

Kathy and Dan

Kathy Timm and Dan O'Fallon - September 07, 2023 at 12:00 AM

GB

“ Ron was a great mentor and friend. He is the definition of a good life lived.

Gary Benzion - September 07, 2023 at 12:00 AM

BG

“ Ron was a great scientist, friend and mentor to me and we shared our love for cytogenetics research. As a young faculty, I visited him in Minnesota in the middle of winter in 1980. Some how we did not connect at the airport and he went back. He was almost back home and I called him that I am waiting for him at the airport. He turned back and received me at the airport with smile. I have never forgotten this incident of his wonderful hospitality. During that time, I was also able to visit Charley Burnham in the nursing him and he was still revising his classic book, " Discussions in Cytogenetics". Ron and Judy were a familiar face at PAG meeting in San Diego, every January and I will miss him very much.

bikram gill - September 07, 2023 at 12:00 AM

TC

“ Without a vision the people perish (Proverbs 19:28) was a consistent Proverb throughout my time as an AgGrad scholar. A visionary who birthed the AgGrad Program that has trained and equipped and imparted VISION into many so as to improve food and nutrition security where it is most needed. Our deepest condolences to so great a visionary and mentor who positioned us so that limits and boundaries could be broken giving us VISION so that we could see the possibilities in the arena of food and nutrition security. Thank you for believing we could do it, equipping us and sending us out to make a difference. Thank you Prof Phillips. I will forever remember you as a visionary and gentle "giant" in casting vision, mentoring, science of food production, generosity and above all demonstrating and showing us the LOVE of GOD in action. I speak the peace of GOD to the whole family. RIP



Tsitsi Cathy - September 07, 2023 at 12:00 AM

SP

“ My name is Sidney Netto Parentoni. Dr. Phillips was my advisor in a Master Degree at the University of Minnesota from August 1990 to December 1992.

It was a pleasure to have had the opportunity to learn from him, not only science but also how to relate with other people, in a way that only Ron had.

Ron and Judy visit me at Embrapa in Brasil and I had the opportunity to meet them again in some occasions.

Ron was one of the most distinguish human being I had met. One example of teacher, husband, father and colleague from all the ones who had the privelege to interact with him.

He had a full life and now complete his mission in this earth.

Thanks Dr. Phillips for given us the privilege to learn from you.

God blessed you and your family.

Sidney

Sidney Netto Parentoni - September 06, 2023 at 12:00 AM

AJ

“ Praying for the Lord's comfort and strength for the family. May God comfort all of you at this time. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

Abhilash John Joseph - September 06, 2023 at 12:00 AM

DS

“ I am remembering a friend today. We met when I joined the Project Ag Grad Committee some years ago. Agriculture was our common interest and it was fun getting to know him at meetings, on his deck at home, as well as on his dock, while talking fishing. A wonderful man. God Bless you and your family.

Dean L. Seeck - September 06, 2023 at 12:00 AM

JS

“ *Brett I am praying for you and your family.*



Jason R Smith - September 06, 2023 at 12:00 AM

RV

“ *Brett,
Your fathers contributions to life were
incredible. You must be very proud of his
accomplishments. I will pray that the Lord
gives you peace during this time of your life.
Rick*



Rick Vickers - September 06, 2023 at 12:00 AM

MW

“ *It's been said, "nothing's ever really lost, if you know right where it is". All believers will get to see Ron again, only this time, without all the pain, suffering and trips to see medical professionals. May our memories be filled with all the wonderful things he was before his illness. We who remain, can take comfort and place our faith and hope in those thoughts and look forward to the day when we meet again. God bless you!*

Mike and Lynda Watson - September 06, 2023 at 12:00 AM

GO

“Tribute to a Great Academic, Friend and Mentor - Professor Ronald L Phillips



Today, we remember the life of Professor Ronald L. Phillips, a model and example of how we ought to care for and love one another.

On Sunday 3rd September, 2023, I received an email from Judy that a man I considered one of the finest Academics, who has made a great impact in the lives of many (including myself), passed away on August 25, 2023. The news of his illness and hospitalization was first transmitted through an email from Eric Forsberg on August 6, 2023.

Ron was the Pioneer Coordinator of the AgGrad Project which was funded through the United Methodist Church of Minnesota, to bring students from developing countries to earn graduate degree and return home to conduct research and train others in Agricultural Production. The AgGrad Project provided me the opportunity to pursue a PhD in Plant Breeding at the University of Minnesota. This was a once in a life time opportunity that transformed my life and made me who I am today.

Those who know Ron (as he was fondly called), his integrity as an Academic and Researcher; as well as his selflessness which he shared with people, will agree with me that we have lost an academic per excellence, a visionary, a friend and a mentor. Ron spent a great deal of his life impacting and investing in the lives of other people. Being the first beneficiary of the AgGrad Project afforded me the opportunity of a very close relationship with Ron and his family, as we travelled to many Churches on speaking engagements and during Annual Conferences to solicit fund in support of the Project.

There is so much to say about Ron - Teacher, Researcher, Friend, but for this occasion, I choose to remember him as a Mentor and a Guiding light. A man may project a philosophy without actually saying it. Ron's philosophy about touching the lives of others which

he vigorously pursued influenced me as a Researcher and an Academic. As I reflect on my years in the university system, and the lives I've been opportune to touch either as a Researcher or an Academic, I cannot but thank Ron for infusing my intellect and life with his presence and virtues.

In our world, we are surrounded by great people especially those who have worked assiduously to make this world more habitable and a better place to live. Ron happened to be one of those great minds. He will be greatly missed!

When one puts a cube of sugar in the mouth, you wish it remains undissolved, so you can continue to enjoy its sweetness. However, it soon dissolves and the sweetness stops. Such is our life, SHORT AND VERY TRANSIENT.

Adieu Professor Ronald L Phillips.

Rest in perfect peace my Teacher, my Friend and my Mentor.

*Gbadebo Olaoye PhD, FGSN
Professor of Plant Breeding and Genetics,
Department of Agronomy,
University of Ilorin, Nigeria.*

Gbadebo Olaoye - September 06, 2023 at 12:00 AM

RJ

“ Trish and I express our sympathy and condolences to the Phillips family and their many close friends. Ron was a brilliant and visionary scientist; noble in his devotion to his family; an exalted yet humble servant to his fellow men and God; and, consequently, an outstanding mentor and example to myself and countless other students, postdocs, and faculty colleagues. I remember one lab meeting after he returned from a conference where the use of PCR for DNA marker analysis was introduced; Ron asked us to analyze the technique and share our opinions. I always appreciated how he treated us graduate students with respect and trust. His respect for me was manifested when, upon first taking me to the lab, he said, "you will see some people working in the lab on Sundays, and if you do that's up to you, but I go to church and do not expect you to work that day". His intuition and foresight on the significance of DNA methylation in gene expression were astounding. Conferences will not be the same without his presence.



Rick Jellen - September 05, 2023 at 12:00 AM

TS

“*Dr. Phillips was a swell person who served as a guiding light to a lot of people, me included.*

I am very good friends with his son, Brett, who is also my business partner in numerous projects. I got to know Dr. Phillips when we were just getting started in several business ventures and Brett turned to him for comment. His advice was priceless! I will never forget him telling us - "Always take the high road, PERIOD!" That was how he lived and how he inspired us to do the same, even in business deals. And his advice was golden!

I had the utmost respect for this man, not only as a world renown geneticist, but also as a really good person. Apparently, so did thousands of others.

And I never saw him without a smile on his face and a positive outlook.

Bless you, Dr. Phillips. You still live inside all of us.

Tommy Strickland - September 05, 2023 at 12:00 AM

JY

“ Numerous students and young scientists have been inspired by his achievements, his lectures, and the interactions with Ron. You can always spot him in the front row of a conference meeting room listening attentively, or in the hallway talking with others with a smile. He wants to be close to researchers and students, knowing their research and their concerns. He is not only intelligent and knowledgeable, but warm, optimistic, and encouraging. He epitomizes the saying, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."



(The picture was taken on Sept. 17, 2015, when Dr. Ron Phillips was having a lunch discussion with students from the Department of Agronomy, Iowa State University. He gave a lecture, *The Path to Discovery*, as part of the ISU President's Distinguished Seminar Series.)

Jianming Yu - September 04, 2023 at 12:00 AM

JW

“ My condolences to Judy and the Phillips family.



Jochum Wiersma - September 04, 2023 at 12:00 AM

WP

“ Professor Phillips was a great and influential scientist, a supportive mentor, and kind and caring person. He was a member of my PhD committee and I spent a summer during grad school in his lab, learning maize tissue culture. He was a valuable consultant to the early ag biotech company, Molecular Genetics, Inc. (MGI), supporting work that eventually led to its patent on maize genetic engineering. His work with maize opaque 2 mutants was also an inspiration for MGI's patent on high lysine in plants.

Like our fellow UMN alumnus, Norman Borlaug, he was concerned about the malnourished in undeveloped countries and was a supporter of bio-fortified Golden Rice, and plant genetic engineering more broadly. In our talks on my visits back to MN from St Louis, and he would question me, being in regulatory affairs, on the regulatory roadblocks to its approval. Some 20+ yrs later, it is only now getting those approvals.

He will be missed by those who knew him, as will the broader scientific community.

William Pilacinski - September 04, 2023 at 12:00 AM

RP

“ Natalie and I are saddened to hear of Ron's passing. We pray for God's comfort and blessing for Judy and all of Ron's family. Ron was a generous person who didn't let his success, achievements, and recognition go to his head. He would introduce younger colleagues like myself to noteworthy scientists and include everyone in the conversation. When he had the opportunity to offer his expertise and effort to research the genetics of the lesser-known crop wildrice, he did not hesitate. I feel privileged to have gotten to know Ron and Judy, and we will miss him.
Raymie Porter, former Wildrice Breeder

Raymie and Natalie Porter - September 04, 2023 at 12:00 AM

JC

“*Dr. Ronald L. Phillips was a beloved mentor and role model. When I was interviewed for the postdoctoral position with Ron and Dr. Howard W. Rines, he joked about dry cold in Minnesota. Indeed, the freezing weather has given us many wonderful memories. Our son, born in Texas, loved snow and skiing, and hockey was his first love of sports among many others. Dr. Phillips was a giant in the field of plant genetics and crop improvement, as well as a steady shoulder that we could lean on. Helen, my wife, and I had an opportunity to be with Dr. Phillips and Dr. Ed Runge, Professor Emeritus at Texas A&M, and his wife Pat, during the 2012 annual meeting of American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in Vancouver, Canada (see photo). Dr. Phillips was a "fatherly" figure for us. His loving marriage to Judy and having a happy family were simply fine examples. At the symposium honoring his 42 years of contributions at University of Minnesota, the audience was amused by a story told by Ron's friend that one day Judy and Ron ran into Judy's first love at a gas station. Later, Ron asked Judy if she felt lucky marrying to an Academy member, instead of an electrician. Judy replied confidently, "if I married him, he would be an Academy member, not you." They often traveled together to attend conferences and meetings such as the Plant and Animal Genome international conference and Maize Genetics Meetings (MGM). In March 2023, Ron and Judy were at MGM in St. Louis. It was a great time; we enjoyed "freedom" after the COVID and talked about the next MGM. Ron was inspirational as always. His passing was great sadness and immeasurable loss. Condolences to family and friends of Ron. His accomplishment and legacy on character and faith will shine forever.*



Jeff & Helen Chen - September 04, 2023 at 12:00 AM

JW

“ My words would not do justice to Ron's life-long accomplishments. He has been a friend to me and my late wife for over 50 years. We have always respected Ron for his dedication to his field of study as long as we have known him. He has always inspired anyone who knew him, with his big smile and serious dedication to his field of study. God bless you Ron. Rest in peace and the glory of your lifelong achievements.

JACK WILKINS - September 04, 2023 at 12:00 AM

GF

“ It was a privilege and joy to work with both Judy and Ron Phillips at Centennial UMC. Such a pair!



Gretchen Fogo - September 03, 2023 at 12:00 AM

JD

“ I have been fortunate enough to have counted Professor Phillips and his family as dear friends for 40 years. Ron was an exceptional father and a truly wonderful man. He will continue to be cherished by everyone who had the good fortune to have known him.

Jeffrey and Lynette Dimmel - September 02, 2023 at 12:00 AM

DA

“ *Condolences to family and friends of Ron. Ron was a wonderful mentor to me, and I felt honored to have been a postdoc in the U of M lab. Best wishes, David*



Dr. David Altman - September 02, 2023 at 12:00 AM