# In memoriam

## Dr. Erik Mirkov

## (1959 - 2018)

The sugarcane research community has lost a brilliant and vibrant scientist. Erik Mirkov, an outstanding plant virologist, an inspiring mentor of national and international students, postdocs and scientists, an excellent leader and collaborator, and an intellectual force in science and biotechnology, passed away at the age of 58 on May 24, 2018, in Denver, Colorado, after a brief hard fight with lung cancer metastasized to the brain. Erik's passing shocked and saddened his friends and colleagues in the plant science community in which he enthusiastically worked and served.

Born in Upland, California, Erik received his B.S. in Botany in 1981, M.S. in Plant Pathology in 1984, and Ph.D. in Plant Pathology in 1988,

all from the University of California, Riverside. He carried out post-doctoral research on plant viral vectors with Chris Lamb and Leona Fitzmaurice from 1988 to 1989 at The Salk Institute Biotechnology/Industrial Associates, Inc. (SIBIA), and worked as a Research Scientist and Project Leader in SIBIA from 1989 to 1992. He was a research biologist with Maarten Chrispeels in the Department of Biology and Center for Molecular Genetics, University of California, San Diego from 1992 to 1994.

Erik joined the Department of Plant Pathology and Microbiology at Texas A&M University in 1994 and was promoted to associate professor in 1999 and full professor in 2004. He worked at Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension Center in Weslaco, Texas. He devoted his scientific career to understanding the mechanisms of antiviral defense pathways in crops, isolating viral resistance genes from host plants, enhancing disease resistance in crops by using a transgenic approach, investigating crosstalk among hormonal, biotic, and abiotic signaling pathways in sugarcane, and developing sugarcane and energy cane as highly productive biofactories. Besides sugarcane, he also contributed to developing disease resistance materials in citrus, rice, and potato.

Although he did not hold any official position, Erik played a leading role in the International Consortium for Sugarcane Biotechnology (ICSB). He was a service provider and served as a principle investigator on ICSB projects. His team isolated and described the virus responsible for sugarcane yellow leaf syndrome (YLS) and developed YLS diagnostic antibodies. The tools developed are used to monitor YLS disease and to assist breeding and selection for resistance in the sugarcane industry worldwide. Erik's team also characterized worldwide genetic diversity of YLS virus, sugarcane mosaic virus, and sorghum mosaic virus, all of which cause diseases in sugarcane. Later, he played a leading role on setting research priorities and rules at ICSB and chaired the selection committee of the James E. Irvine Memorial Travel Award that promotes the work of emerging young sugarcane researchers.

On a personal level, Erik was kind, caring, fair, and optimistic. He had a good sense of humor and a penetrating mind on scientific and social issues. Many of us have fond memories of interacting with him in ICSB and other conferences. His passing leaves a void that may not be filled for a long time. He will be remembered as a good friend, an inspiring mentor, a pioneering scientist, and a contributing member of the sugarcane community.

Erik is survived by his brother Tony Mirkov, sister Maria Kobold, step-son Houston Broussard, his grandchildren, Batson (4) and Willow (1), and several nieces and nephews. He was preceded in death by his wife, Daphna Kaye Oaks-Mirkov, and his parents, Ted Mirkov and Eleanor Mirkov.

Expressions of condolences have been sent on behalf of ISSCT to Tony Mirkov, Maria Kobold and Houston Broussard.

Ray Ming
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Mona Damaj
Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension Center
ISSCT Secretariat