

David was one of a kind colleague, friend, and an amazing human being overall. I had the honor of working closely with him in the laboratory for several years. David was an astute observer and well-read academician and his incredibly sharp intellect combined with down to earth honesty made him a world class researcher. It also gave him the talent to pointedly comment on the – often comical - absurdities of everyday life, especially in the world of science. Even the loftiest theories and luminaries were not safe from David's sharp-witted assessments. One of the finest examples was him recognizing a "paradigm shift" in the increasing trend among authors to label even trivial findings as "paradigm shifts."

Despite being at a senior stage in his career, he never shied away from teaching the basics, as he did when I needed a refresher in cell culture techniques after joining the Blau lab during the end of my clinical fellowship. I will never forget his guidance. – **Gerhard Weber**



David made everyone around him shine brighter. My fondest memories with David were the times where we got into deep debates about science. Before Stanford, I had never met anyone like David that I can "nerd-out" with. David had a strong passion for finding the truth and he was a molecular biologist at heart, striving to understand the mechanisms of everything we studied. We'd tear into papers that we both read and go down the "rabbit hole" of trying to come up with what really is happening in the cell. Hours of discussion over coffee at the whiteboard. It was always lighthearted, a joy and full of fun. Sometimes we'd both have "eureka!" moments and make a discovery! – **Will Wang**

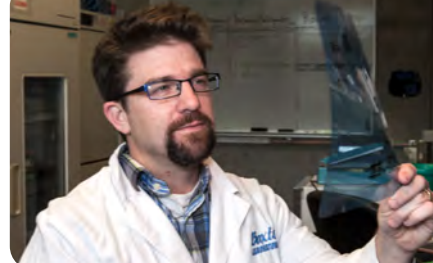
Baxter Labs retreat at the Quadrus Conference Center in Menlo Park, where David and Will brainstormed the goofiest, most exciting scientific theories. – January 31, 2017



I met David in February 2022, when I joined the Blau lab. I remember that our first interaction consisted in him asking me why, as Italians, we speak with a lot of gestures, and me responding with a spontaneous gesture indicating that "I don't know why, it's just natural." We both laughed. Ever since, he would make fun gestures whenever he would see me, or wanted to interact with me, and to get my attention he would yell some random funny Italian words, preferentially very stupid ones. Being new to the US, having someone at work who would look for funny interactions has been important, it made me feel comfortable. And that was the same for all the other lab members, we would joke and laugh with each other, and David was normally among the initiators of our conversations. We could talk about science, a subject he was very passionate about, but also about any other topic spanning from religion, to sports, to history, culture, geography, and cuisine, on which we would argue which was the best Italian recipe – **Elena Monti**

I met David during Christmas of 2011 when I visited Stanford for my postdoc interview. As a postdoc who just joined the lab a year earlier, David shared with me his experience of the Blau lab one year in and the cool ideas he had regarding his reprogramming project. Half a year later, I joined the lab and became David's desk-mate in the lab. One accomplishment me and the other Blau members were proud of is converting David from a PC into a Mac. At the beginning, he really protested overpriced Apple products and loved the good old PC. But I guess we were more persuasive. Once hooked, David was all about linking the programs and be able to monitor for storms for his castle in the mountains. His pile of printed papers soon evolved into multi-device linked pdf libraries. This is David, a scientist that read a lot and thought about things a lot.

He was always this dependable "third reviewer" you can consult with to see what holes you still have in your project. He was old school that appreciated the power of cloning so we can ask better questions. He dreamed about designing new biological drugs but was still attentive to his family as we exchanged our weekend family outing stories on Monday mornings. David was a good man, a smart man, and a cool dude to hang out with. – **Alex Chang**



David was such an influential figure in the lab and such a brilliant scientist. He was always asking questions that made me think deeply about my projects. He was also a devoted husband and father. He would even give me a lot of parenthood advice as a new mom back then when my daughter was born. He was an introvert but once you started talking to him he would just always open up and we could talk for hours. – **Adelaida Palla**

David was a fun colleague, a dedicated scientist and a proud dad. He loved science, would voraciously read the scientific literature and greatly enjoyed discussing science in lab meetings, as well as over lunch or coffee. You would often find him at the whiteboard sharing his scientific vision with a student or a colleague. He was very generous and always willing to help out.

David had a good sense of humor. We had some fun discussions about almost anything, including skateboarding and our time in grad school. I remember one time David was talking fondly about his chicken coop and I said that if he brought me some fresh eggs, I would make tiramisu for the lab. The following week David brought lots of fresh eggs to the lab and several of us prepared some treats that we enjoyed together. It was a feast. – **Ermelinda Porpiglia**



David exuded compassion and poise. He was a true gentleman and scientist at heart. He was a worldly man and great father. I have many fond memories discussing publications and the personalities of the scientists behind them. David had the rare ability to frame the scientific enterprise from the human perspective of the individuals doing the work. He would call things how he saw them, whether it was a breakthrough worthy of a Nobel or whether the stated conclusions weren't worth the paper they were printed on.

**The Light at the End of the Tunnel**  
When I joined the lab he sensed my naivete and eagerness, and wanted to ground me in the reality that is the long journey of a PhD student. In my first few years, he would tell me that I'm so far off from the end that I cannot even glimpse the light at the end of the tunnel. After some years passed, following a particularly productive lab meeting, he walked over to let me know that the light was now in sight. I knew that was a strong vote of confidence. He had a knack of always using just the right metaphor.

**The Castle**  
My second story is about David's stories of spending his time as a child during the summers at his grandfather's home in Tucson, Arizona. It was a large home - David called it a castle. He would wonder how his grandfather could afford the property given his modest window blinds business. David would then go on to say that members of the mafia came to pay their respects at his grandfather's funeral. Perhaps, David would hint but go no further, there is more than meets the eye. – **Glenn Markov**



My fond memory of David was when David kindly and gently pointed out that ice buckets are probably loaded with RNases, after I had written "For RNA only" onto an ice bucket. David was always kind when applying his great mind to help people. – **John Ramunas**

My favorite memory of David is how funny he was. He swore in the lab which made me think he was a cool dad. He always made me laugh or smile with all his jokes. He also spoke very fondly of his wife and children (part of the reason why I'm in nursing school today is because of all the cool things he told me about his wife so thank you David for inspiring me). Lastly, he is the only person I know that can rock a beret, so the next time I see a beret I will be reminded of David and the honor it was to know him. – **Ann Yang**



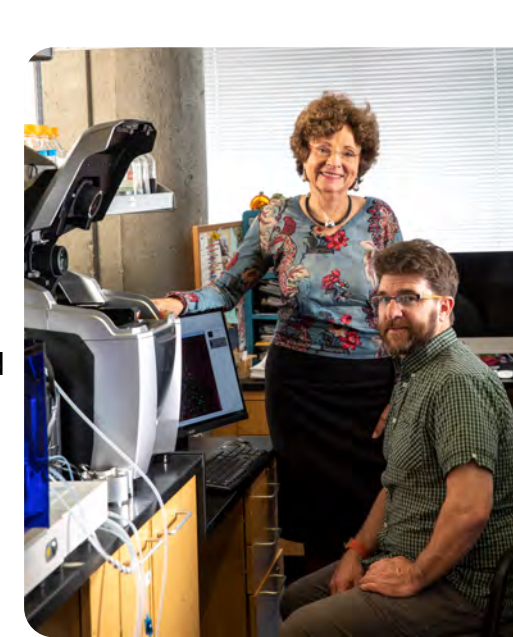
Without question, the memory of David that will forever be ingrained in my mind is the epic adventure Hari Sampath, Srinath Sampath, Andrew Ho, Russ Haynes and I had with David one fateful evening in the brand spanking new Lokey Stem Cell building. A misadventure sparked by the loss of one of our beloved remote-control helicopters onto the roof of the building culminated in fancy cupcakes, beer, ping pong, and endless banter that will never be forgotten. – **Penny Gilbert**

It is hard to pay tribute to who David truly was, not because I only knew so much of him, but because there was so much to know about him and to learn from him.

Nature, climbing, biology, education, abalones, mountain lions, epigenetics, backcountry skiing philosophy, hidden pick-your-own chess-nut forest, boating, parenting, critical thinking, good (and bad) jokes, composure, and the danger of the peninsula hills roads... I remember so well talking about his wild encounter with a huge owl crashing on his windshield while driving home at night... But also the beautiful picture he'd show me of his weekend trips. Talking about kids and parenting struggles and joys. Hearing about forest kids and local rednecks. Discussing spending a weekend together with the families at his lake outback house north of SF. Seeing his concerns for forest fire, always thinking about his family safety.

David was my desk and lab bench neighbour for two years and he has been a fantastic example and coach for me when joining the Blau lab. During these two years, he supported and challenged me. Regularly, sharing lunch, he taught me how to respect everyone's work and undertaking. – **Gaspard Pardon**

David and I were obsessed with trying to take golf Lessons at Stanford, but it was super difficult to get into the classes. So every quarter David and I would remind each other of the day that we could register online for the classes. We would both sit at our computers and at the stroke of 9AM we would try to register online and then continually refresh our page over and over again until inevitably we got the message that all classes were full. However, this past winter David was actually able to register and was able to take one of the classes. But it was complicated because his computer froze with the class in his cart so he couldn't proceed and thought he lost the class. We were both really bummed and commiserated over coffee in the lab. We didn't care which one of us got into a class just as long as one of us did. But then the next morning he got an email from the recreation department saying that they had a technical glitch the day before and that he was actually registered for the class. He sent me a picture of the email by text with the comment "HOLY TOLEDO!" We celebrated that day at work and David suggested we both buy lottery tickets because the Universe was aligning with our wishes. And, of course, David being David – he explained that the golf instructor wasn't that good and that he probably didn't actually need the lessons! – **Peggy Kraft**



David was a strong man! I'm always asked by others to open bottles when the lid is tight. One day I found myself having trouble opening mine (a total shame). I knew the only capable to do it was David. In fact, I asked him, and he effortlessly opened it. Totally a badass! – **Minas Nalbandian**

deliberately with genealogy taken into consideration. It was so heartwarming to see him be excited about Halloween with his sons. – **Asuka Eguchi**

David was an extraordinary scientist and a wonderful human being. He was a star at UMass Med School, and the faculty there, including his advisor, Joel Richter, Craig Peterson, and Craig Mello attests to his accomplishments. Soon after joining the lab, David was awarded one of the most prestigious postdoctoral fellowships from the Life Sciences Research Foundation. He was a fountain of knowledge, about science and scientists. He was a true scholar.

We shared some wonderful adventures. David came to a meeting I organized with John Gurdon at a stately British home, Heston House. We played croquet on the lawn and ate crumpets and scones with clotted cream. David loved it. We had challenging discussions with Rick Young and Amanda Fisher and Wolf Reik – as they commented on our heterokaryon findings. David went with me to a Cold Spring Harbor meeting on nuclear reprogramming and we dined in the "mess hall" with James Watson and Gary Ruvkun among other illustrious scientists. David presented his groundbreaking work on active DNA demethylation which proved that, counter to prevailing dogma, nuclear reprogramming in heterokaryons as well as iPSC was mediated by an active process mediated by AID and TET, via base excision repair. It was met with considerable excitement. We shared so much science, and David impacted so many people who came through the Blau lab. – **Helen Blau**

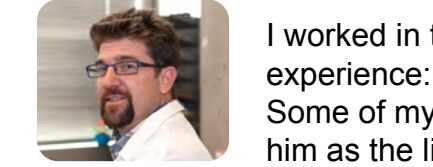
I was always struck by David's willingness and enthusiasm to share his near encyclopedic knowledge of biology with other lab members, especially junior trainees. He was the first person I and a Master's student working with me turned to when we had a challenging cloning project. David not only helped devise the initial strategy, but he also spent a large amount of time working 1-on-1 with the student troubleshooting this tricky genetic sequence. When even David couldn't get the PCR-based approach to work, we knew we needed a different strategy. David was a great sounding board for designing experiments. He always advocated meticulous design of experimental setup and inclusion of thoughtful controls to make sure valid and meaningful results were obtained. – **Chris Madl**



# DAVID BURNS

## 1974-2022

Working for David in the Blau Lab was my first job out of college and I can't imagine a better introduction to the real world. David's honesty, humor and brilliance are one of the most important influences on my life and have helped me become the scientist I am today. I think about the things he taught me often, if not daily. David loved simple sayings that conveyed immense meaning, next to his desk he had a quote on a piece of paper that read, "Better is the enemy of good enough." He always reminded me of this virtue and gave me grief over my distraction with unimportant details, in that way that only David could give you grief because he cared about you and wanted to help you grow. To this day, that saying is still my favorite and has helped to keep me grounded both in science and in life generally. I couldn't be more grateful to have crossed paths with David, without him I would never have become a scientist. I aspire to be half as good a mentor, communicator, thinker and friend as David. – **Matt Blake**



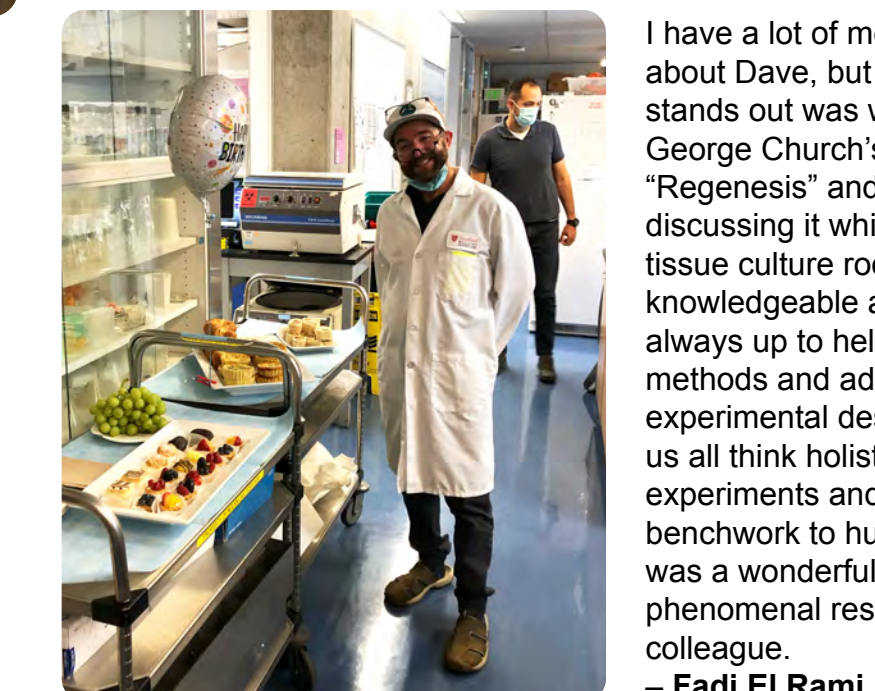
I worked in the lab for two months as a summer intern. There were many memorable aspects to my experience: snacks together for lab birthdays, making appendorf bombs, exploring the concept of lab dogs. Some of my most cherished memories, however, come from working with Dr. Burns. I'll always remember him as the life of the lab; his loud jokes and his love for making conversations with others made working at the Blau Lab so enjoyable and personal. One vivid memory I have was talking to him about driving. I had made a passing statement about how I hadn't learned how to drive yet, and Dr. Burns started a 20-minute conversation with me, a high school intern, in the middle of his busy day. Another memory was when he and Dan replaced a dead plant on my desk with a printout of a thriving one. He always found the best ways to make everybody at the lab feel included. – **Sriram Bhimaraju**



David was an undeniable presence during my years in the lab. Perhaps my fondest (and silliest) memory was our war of silent attrition when we sat at either side of the plastic divider separating two sides of the lab. I would position my collection of stuffed animals to face his desk. When he blocked the view with boxes, I would respond by stacking the toys even higher. This proceeded for probably two years – by the time I left his side was a teetering city line of books and boxes, stared down by my improbable army of beanie babies, giant microbe toys, and silly memes printouts (contributed in part by other labmates who eventually couldn't help but join in). Sitting at my new desk facing only me, I think they miss their previous view. – **Nora Yucel**

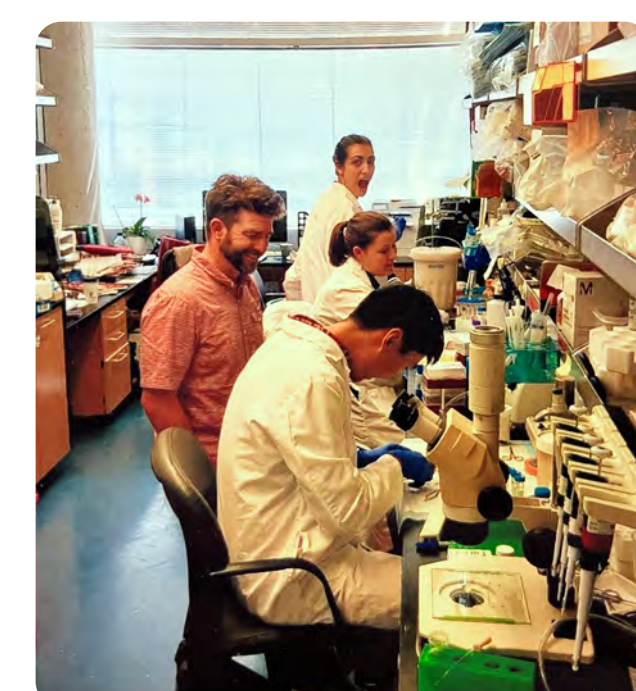
David was my commiserating buddy when it came to talking about COMMUTING, crappy drivers, road conditions, or preparing for fires.

This one time, I happened to ask him about Comcast, why it sucked so bad up there and what I could do to make it better. He was always happy to lend advice. – **Kassie Koleckar**



I have a lot of memories to share about Dave, but one event that stands out was when we both read George Church's book "Regenesis" and spent a week discussing it while working in tissue culture room. Dave was so knowledgeable and a deep thinker, always up to help and discuss methods and advise best experimental designs. He did push us all think holistically about experiments and connect benchmark to human health. He was a wonderful friend, a phenomenal researcher, and great colleague. – **Fadi El Rami**

I remember David vividly as the witty, intelligent, knowledgeable man who was always on something new, whether it's his septic tank, or his new skateboard, more likely on the most fascinating new research publication. David, since the first day I met him, has always been the "bookworm" who has his noise cancelling headphones on, focusing on the paper he was reading. Out the blue, you'd hear him excitedly sharing the intriguing experimental design the team executed to hide the fault of their proposed mechanism, and you would never see when the conversation was coming until David's voice appears right next to you. Any time when you need truthful advice or see someone skateboard his way to the parking lot, David was the man to go to. I remember David explaining to me about camelid antibodies long before the hit it is today, his insights on science and also the newest technology was something I'd always look forward to. – **Andrew Chang**



There is truly no way to describe who David was to the lab. He was an encyclopedia of knowledge – he knew everything: the history of scientists, the newest papers and research (some of which had yet to be published), and always knew how to troubleshoot a protocol or provide tips to overcome hurdles in an experiment. Beyond that, David brought a specific energy to the lab – he had a sense of humor that could lighten up any difficult day, but also remain serious enough to get work done. David was a great colleague, mentor, and friend. I'm sharing with you four of MANY interactions I've had with David despite only knowing him for a little under a year.

**Late Night Shift**  
David was quite the entertaining guy to have around, particularly on long days. One evening, I was working on an experiment, and David was at his desk streaming Thursday Night Football, knowing all too well that I have very little knowledge about football. As the game progressed, David kept telling me more and more facts about the players, teams, coaches, etc. (David really was an encyclopedia!) At one point, the Dolphins came on, and David asked me "Do you know the Dolphins?" I KNEW this one and was excited that I finally knew the answer to one of his quizzes. That's when I confidently blurted back, "I don't know them personally, but YES, I know who the FLORIDA Dolphins are." David couldn't stop laughing at me for this huge mistake. He reminded me about it quite regularly afterwards.

**Fixing my car**  
I need to start this story by letting you know that since I started working in the lab, I have had non-stop problems with my car. Every time I had a problem with my car, David would catch me watching YouTube videos on how to do a diagnose and fix the problem, replace a broken part of my car, or even just diagnose the check engine light. These quickly became great bonding moments as we watched car fixing videos on YouTube together (even though we probably should have been working... oops!). One day, we were watching a DIYer explain how to change a coolant valve on the engine. As this YouTubeer opened the box for the new valve, he joyfully started chanting a joyful jingle for O'Reilly Auto Parts. David and I both had a good laugh at it, and over the next few weeks, I would hum the jingle every so often to bug David.

**Doing the rounds**  
David brought life and energy to the lab, and we would be reminded about this every few days. Sometimes (ok, quite often), David showed up to the lab and just wanted to talk. He would always start with me because I sat beside him. If I was free, we would usually talk for a bit, before I would slowly get back to work and phase him out with music. If I was busy, David took the opportunity to talk to me about anything for a good 20 minutes before moving on. David would then spend the better part of an hour and talk to every postdoc, trainee, lab manager, or anyone around really. I called this "David's rounds," because in the matter of 1 hour he managed to talk to everyone in the lab and give them a good laugh. After David's rounds were complete, he would come back to his desk, and we would spend the next hour discussing experiments, science, theory, advances in the field, and anything related to our work. David had such a wealth of knowledge that these were fantastic learning moments. I must have learned more in the 10 months I knew David than in most of my time in grad school. Doing his rounds like that also brought a smile to everyone in the lab. It made hard days go by faster, and good days even better. Personally, I really enjoyed that David did this, and I'm positive everyone in the lab also did – it put everything in perspective, put stress at ease, and reminded us to seize the day.

**WHO KEEPS TOUCHING MY STUFF??!**  
My final story about David is the best, but also a long one in the making. This story dates back to early January 2022 when I first started in the lab, and David recruited me to help out with some experiments. When we started working, I noticed that David would often look around his workspace and would mutter "Where did this go?!" and "Who's touching all my stuff?!" It turns out that David had a great memory, and despite his workbench appearing to be a complete mess, it was organized in a very specific way that only David would recognize. Over the next few months, every now and then I would hear David muttering about someone moving his stuff around. As David and I became closer and started joking around a lot, I decided that I wanted to start pranking David a bit. So, every now and then, I would make very subtle changes to his workspace, use some of his pipette tips, "borrow" a tube rack, etc. Each time I would do something like that, David would see it the very next day and would mutter about someone touching his stuff. I found out that David would go to Peggy each time this would happen and ask her to stop touching his stuff, because David was convinced it was Peggy.

Whether it's to ask him questions about science, have conversations about everything and anything, or joking around and sharing great laughs – David was a vital part of the team. – **Dan Robinson**