

Hallmark of Humility: Jeffrey L. Smith Graduate Student Travel Award

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Humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking about yourself less," C.S. Lewis said. This quote on humility describes the late Jeffrey L. Smith, who despite his notable scientific accomplishments, worked tirelessly for the benefit of his mentees.



Dr. Jeffrey Smith taking soil samples.

"Few scientists effectively bridged field research, lab research, and mentorship the way Jeff did," recalls Dr. Vanessa Bailey, Earth Scientist at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, who was one of Smith's postdocs. "Jeff was very generous with his knowledge, time, and equipment. He most enjoyed the one-to-one interaction with graduate students and junior scientists. I still hold myself to the standards he set for me as a mentor and a scientist. Jeff deeply influenced my career and continues to do so."

Dr. Smith attended the University of California–Berkeley (UCB) after serving in the Vietnam War. He continued his education at Washington State University, earning his M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in Soil Science. Returning to UCB as a postdoctoral scholar, Smith helped to lead one of the largest ecosystem

science projects funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). He then spent 1986 to 2013 at the USDA-ARS in Pullman, WA, becoming known for his groundbreaking research on soil carbon and nitrogen cycling as well as the impact of global climate change on terrestrial ecosystems. His work with the ARS included the Climate Change National Program and the Greenhouse Gas Reduction through the Agriculture Carbon Enhancement Network (GRACEnet). Smith also served on the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). In 2007, Smith was among the scientists recognized for their contributions to the IPCC when the organization was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

“Jeff was an outstanding scientist and researcher who had a great capacity and passion for helping students,” remembers Dr. Stephen C. Hart of the University of California–Merced. “I first met Jeff while I was a Ph.D. student at UCB as we were both working on an NSF-supported project entitled ‘Process Controls and Nitrogen Transformation in Terrestrial Ecosystems.’... His guidance, advice, and friendship had a profound impact on me and the scientist I have become.”

“As a grad student I thought Dr. Smith was strict and terrifying,” remembers Dr. Lynne Carpenter-Boggs, Professor of Soil Science, Washington State University. “Once I knew him enough to look past the crusty exterior, it was obvious he had a gift for mentoring students. He made himself available to students—we were comfortable discussing our ideas with him. Jeff had a big heart and was especially supportive.”

“Integrity in research was paramount to Jeff. He made sure students were credited for their work. Jeff was a rigorous researcher who taught by allowing mistakes,” notes Alex Crump, Smith's final graduate student who is now a research scientist at the University of Idaho. “I incorporate many of his teaching techniques when I am assisting students in the lab.”

“Jeff felt SSSA was his professional home and was an active member in the Soil Biology and Biochemistry and Forest, Range, and Wildland Soils Divisions,” Hart says. “He worked to improve the inclusivity of the Societies and encouraged his students to participate in meetings.”

Graduate Student Travel Award

The Jeffrey L. Smith Soil Biology and Biochemistry and Forest, Range, and Wildland Soils Graduate Student Travel Fund Award was established in 2018 to honor Smith's extensive contributions to soil and environmental science and his passion for mentoring students while helping them attend scientific meetings.

Angela Possinger, Ph.D. candidate in Soil and Crop Sciences at Cornell University, was the first to receive the Smith Travel Fund Award. “Dr. Smith's work to understand the interactions among agricultural management, soil microbial communities, and soil health was part of the foundation and motivation for

my research interests in soil organic matter cycling,” she says. “The travel award allowed me to present my research and receive critical feedback that I incorporated into the publication process.” Possinger says that attending the meeting enabled her to connect with researchers from around the world and discuss postdoctoral positions that led to her current position at Virginia Tech in the Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation. “The Society shows support for graduate students by incorporating student oral presentations, networking events, training and leadership opportunities, academic awards, and travel funding awards. I know myself and graduate student colleagues are very thankful for the support.”



The first recipient of the Jeffrey L. Smith Travel Award, Angela Possinger of Cornell (center), met the scholarship's primary donors, Steve and Carol Hart, in January at SSSA's International Soils Meeting in San Diego.

“This is the perfect award to be endowed on Jeff’s behalf,” Bailey notes. “Jeff was one of the top soil environmental scientists of our time. Being humble, he wouldn’t have attached his name to an award, which makes the award even more appropriate.”

Smith believed his students' personal and professional success to be more important than his own. If you would like to honor Dr. Jeffrey L. Smith's contributions to science and his legacy of humbly mentoring students, you can contribute to the Jeffrey L. Smith Soil Biology and Biochemistry and Forest,

Range, and Wildland Soils Graduate Student Travel Fund Award by visiting a-s-f.org/donate or calling Eric Welsh at 608-273-8081.

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