Remembrance of Professor Peter Arthur Fox

By Karyn Rogers and Jim Hendler, March 26, 2022

A year ago today, March 26, our dear colleague, mentor, and friend passed away unexpectedly, dying peacefully in his sleep. Dr. Fox joined Rensselaer in 2008 as the Tetherless World Senior Constellation Professor; and Professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences, Computer Science, and Cognitive Science. He went on to become the Director of the Information Technology and Web Science program. Prior to coming to Rensselaer, Dr. Fox was the chief computational scientist at the High Altitude Observatory of the National Center for Atmospheric Research, after an initial appointment as a research scientist at Yale University. His work has aided researchers in determining the most effective use of data to advance knowledge within their fields at organizations including the Deep Carbon Observatory, NASA, the U.S. Geological Survey, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the U.S. Global Change Research Program.

Dr. Fox earned both his Bachelor of Science degree with honors in mathematics and a doctorate in mathematics from Monash University in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. He went on to become a major force in Earth Science Informatics and a leader in the growing field of Data Science. Among his numerous awards and honors, he received the Ian McHarg Medal from the European Geosciences Union and the Martha Maiden Lifetime Achievement Award from the Federation of Earth Science Information Partners (ESIP). In 2015, he was elected as a fellow of the American Geophysical Union and in 2018, was elected as a fellow to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in recognition of his "distinguished, innovative, and sustained fundamental contributions in Earth and space science informatics and data science research, education, and service."

Among the things Dr. Fox was proudest of at Rensselaer was the growth he brought to the Information Technology and Web Science program. He brought new energy to the program, convinced professors from other departments to help support curricular improvement, recruited lecturers and professors of the practice to help create new courses, arranged activities such as tug-of-wars to build camaraderie among the students, and developed and taught several new courses of his own. In 2017, the program was rated #1 in the U.S. by College Choice, citing many of the innovations that Peter had introduced. His shared pride was always on display at Commencement, when he held up one finger, remarked "We're #1!," and presented the degrees to the ITWS graduates.

For all of his accolades and elevated status, Peter was a consummate colleague and always considered it his central mission to help elevate those around him. He was incredibly devoted to his graduate students and dedicated himself to mentoring early career faculty here at RPI and throughout his scientific community. He would spend endless hours developing proposals, projects, and courses with new faculty and made sure young faculty were highlighted both at academic conferences and campus events. With his senior colleagues, Peter served as a "peer mentor" helping to create new interdisciplinary connections and jointly working to find ways to help navigate academia's inevitable "quicksands," both at and beyond Rensselaer. When any of his colleagues, at any rank, had a problem, his advice, sometimes sideways, always found the solution. Peter had an incredible ability to recognize and draw out people's strengths, helping everyone to become a better version of themselves.

Peter's wisdom taught so many of us to follow his example to "pay it forward." We were both lucky to call him mentor and friend, and our careers were forever changed by his wisdom, patience, and guidance, and by his unrelenting faith in our abilities to improve.