

Helen Davies: An infectious passion for teaching, 50 years and counting

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Every Friday morning, Helen C. Davies, a 93-year-old Professor of Microbiology at University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine, sets off punctually at 7:45 a.m. to the infectious disease management meeting at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. Helen, who insists people call her by her first name, can't remember how long she has been attending these meetings. "For a mighty long time," according to her.

As a lifelong educator, Helen has taught over 10,000 medical students for more than half a century. She has won the annual "Excellence in Teaching" award 16 times. Her portrait, which can be found in Johnson Pavilion, was done by Nelson Shanks—whose other commissions include Pope John Paul II, President Ronald Reagan, President Bill Clinton, and Princess Diana. Despite her innumerable contributions to the University, Helen has never stopped perfecting her teaching. Her infectious disease class, where she sings to students, has helped generations of medical students learn about pathogens in witty ways.

The daughter of a rabbi, Helen was born in Manhattan, New York, in 1925. After growing up in the Great Depression, Helen went to Brooklyn College, where she received her bachelor's degree in chemistry during World War II. She graduated college when she was 19, as the only female in her class. "I never had trouble finding dates back in college, since I was the only girl," she quipped. Helen received her master's degree in biochemistry from the University of Rochester in 1950, followed by her doctorate in physical bio-

chemistry from the University of Pennsylvania in 1960, and has stayed at Penn ever since.

Her husband, Robert E. Davies, a biochemist, a Benjamin Franklin Professor, and University Professor at Penn's veterinary school, died in 1993 while mountain climbing in Scotland. Soon after her husband's death, Helen moved into the Quad, living with hundreds of freshmen. "I just love the students so much, I want to be part of them," Helen says.

Helen is the eldest and the first woman faculty master—the highest administrator on site—for Ware College House. She leads both the Women in Science and Infectious Disease programs. Her apartment, on the second floor of Ware College House, has two bedrooms and a big living room that Helen adores since "it can host as many students as possible when they come visit me."

Like most students in the building, Helen also has a roommate—Emilie



Helen holding a picture of her from the 1960s.

Anderson, who graduated from Penn in 2005. Before her graduation, Emilie came to Helen for advice—she was offered an incredible job opportunity, but it didn't pay well. Should she keep looking for other jobs, or take this precious opportunity? "Helen told me, 'Sweetheart, if this job is what you love to do, you should take it! Don't worry about the money. I have a spare bedroom in my apartment, and you can crash with me if that can relieve you of your financial burden,'" Emilie said. "And I never moved out—it's been 15 years."

Like Emilie, many others, especially women and other minorities in the Penn community and beyond, have also been infected by Helen's love. Robert Ross, one of the few black pre-med students on campus in the 1960s, persisted in medicine because of Helen's constant attention and encouragement. More than two decades later, Dr. Ross has served as the Philadelphia Health Commissioner and is now the CEO and President of the California Endowment, a major health foundation in California.

"To talk about Helen without mentioning her contribution to the women and minority communities is just diminishing," said Susan Weiss, who is also a Professor of Microbiology. "I mean think about it—she marched with Martin Luther King at Selma, during the Civil



Helen C. Davies, a 93-year-old Professor of Microbiology, working in her office at University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine.

Rights Movement in the 60s." Before Dr. Weiss's arrival in the 1980s, Helen had been the only female faculty member in the Microbiology Department since its establishment in the 1970s.

Helen not only infects people with her passion for her career but also with her love of life. Just two years ago, at age 91, in her wheelchair, Helen went on a trip with Emilie traversing eight countries, from Southeast Asia to the Middle East, in 20 days. "Apparently, not only people who know Helen love her, the entire world loves her," Emilie laughed. "When we were in Burma, I was taking pictures... and I turned around, saw a group of Buddhist monks carrying Helen and her wheelchair all the way up to the top of the monument. And what's amazing was that they were communicating in languages that neither of them could understand."

Only until recent years did Helen start to ease her workload—meaning not leaving for work at 6:00 a.m. and returning home at 11:00 p.m. She now spends most of her day reading in her apartment—sometimes a book a day or sometimes an entire weekly Science Magazine subscription—with the company of "Alexa", who turns on the lights and plays music for her. When asked when she would retire, Helen smiled, "Never."