

Viewpoint Mauricio, humble, creative, generous - and my friend

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It is one o'clock in the morning, and once again I wake up with tears in my eyes, remembering my colleague and great friend, Dr. Mauricio Golberg, who died suddenly May 30.

Over the years, we often talked about our beloved Argentina, where we were born, in small towns very much alike, both firmly embedded in the vast pampa.

From those small beginnings, Mauricio came to exemplify for me many of the best qualities of the Argentine Jewish gaucho. He was a humble man, creative, generous and kind, who felt great compassion and love for all of humanity.

Mauricio was innovative in surgery. In the laboratory, he was a pioneer in heart-transplant research before the first human heart transplant was made in South Africa. In addition, Mauricio created a surgical procedure for tuberculosis that was widely used until antibiotics specific to the treatment of the disease were developed.

In all the years I knew him, he never showed me the many newspaper clippings that report and document his groundbreaking work in surgical procedures, of great consequence to modern medicine.

Late in May, he finally showed these clippings to me and others in our group who regularly gather to paint together. We were rightly and properly impressed.

In his retirement, Mauricio was always first to arrive in the studio, with a box of paints and brushes his beloved children, Mark and Jane, had given him on his 80th birthday.

First, he donned the white coat he had used in the consulting room but which now served to protect his clothes from paint.

While he took out his paints, he would bring me up to date on the news from the previous day's New York Times. Then he'd sit down, arrange his canvas and begin to apply color with great freedom and speed, as if he had always been a painter.

Periodically, he stopped, smiled, dipped his brush in another color and applied it swiftly. Then he stopped again, stepped back and smiled with great satisfaction. Mauricio's inner child was playing at full tilt.

He applied colors to his canvas with complete freedom, combining them intuitively in ways that reminded our Thursday morning painting group of Marc Chagall and Matisse.

When we expressed our amazement at his work, he responded with another broad smile and a very gauchoesque question, "Te parece, Che?" ("Do you really think so?")

When Mauricio was on winter vacation with wife Claire in Florida, he often called our Thursday group to tell us how much he missed being with us, and to wish us all a good week.

In his quiet, understated fashion, Mauricio was also extremely generous. Last year, I went to a South County professional because of a foot infection. She told me that she had arrived in South County several years ago, ready to start her practice but without the finances needed to open an office.

Dr. Golberg found out about her situation and offered her the use of his office and equipment free of charge. Her story did not surprise me, although Mauricio had never told me of it.

In a June 10 article, Gerry Goldstein aptly noted that Mauricio was "an optimist who abhorred destruction - whether in thought or deed." He truly was a compassionate man.

I often witnessed the sorrow he felt when he heard of any discrimination, political injustice against the Third World or a holocaust of any sort.

Only recently, we were together looking at a book that described the atrocities committed by the military dictatorship during the '70s in Argentina. It was a time when thousands of young men and women simply "disappeared," or were subjected to horrendous torture and death, often at the sadistic whim of some anonymous bureaucrat.

Suddenly, the two of us became silent, and I watched as tears trickled down the dear face of my friend. He touched me deeply with his noble heart and openly expressed compassion.

When the painting group next meets, Mauricio's chair will be empty. How much we will miss his wonderful sense of humor, which so often brought the group to helpless laughter.

How much I will miss his typical way of saying good-bye to me each week when I walked him to his car. Alluding to a famous Argentine dance, he half sang, half intoned, "Adios muchachos de mi vida. Tango querido. Tango Argentino." ("Good-bye lifelong friends. Dear tango. Argentinian tango.")

Alberto Gambarini, of South Kingstown, is a retired surgeon who later in life took up art and art instruction. Dr. Golberg, one of his students, quickly became a close friend.

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