



## Robert V. Stevens

March 24, 1941 - March 9, 1984

*Organic Syntheses*, Volume 63, with its emphasis on stereochemical selection, is a fitting place for a tribute to Robert Velman Stevens. Professor Stevens served as a member of the Editorial Board of *Organic Syntheses* and edited Volume 61. His great passion in science revolved on the hub of natural products synthesis the artistry inherent in the best syntheses.

Professor Stevens had the fascination for complex natural product structures that all true organic chemists share, but the alkaloids held a special place in his heart. His interest in alkaloids led to a broader interest in the chemistry of organic nitrogen compounds. His early work on the rearrangement of cyclopropylimines fitted neatly into the total synthesis of the *Aizoaceae* alkaloid, mesembrine. His masterful control of the stereochemical details of nucleophilic attack on immonium ions led to the stereospecific total synthesis of the ladybug defense alkaloids, coccinelline and precoccinelline. Nitron additions appealed to Professor Stevens, and they performed an important role in his total synthesis of nickel(II) octamethylcorphin. The nitron additions also occupied a special place in his synthesis of vitamin B-12. This audacious, brilliant plan-begun by the young assistant professor at Rice University - is a measure of Professor Stevens as a scientist, as an artist, and as a man. It was his solitary ascent of Everest. It was a consuming passion. His death in the ascent does not detract from the scope and the beauty of the plan. His sense of style remains in his students and his colleagues.

Professor Stevens was a special kind of teacher. He would shuffle into an undergraduate class, clear his throat, and say, "Unhuh." The metamorphosis came when he picked up the chalk. No one who saw Professor Stevens work with chalk and the elegant structures he drew will forget the simple beauty of his lectures. He was a transformed man with chalk in his hands. His dry wit and diffident charm came through with clarity, and his sense of style and art pervaded the room. Professor Stevens' colleague Professor Michael Jung was one of the undergraduates first

introduced to organic synthesis in these lectures.

Robert Velman Stevens was born in Mason City, Iowa on March 24, 1941. This year was a good year for natural products synthetic chemists; in addition to Professor Stevens, it produced Professor David Evans, Professor Martin Semmelhack, Professor Barry Sharpless, and Professor Barry Trost. The lusty, rugged character of Mason City, Iowa - known as River City in Meredith Willson's *Music Man* - left an enduring imprint on Bob Stevens. In fact, many of the Iowa traits Willson emphasized fit Bob well. He was certainly "Iowa Stubborn." He had too the bounce and enthusiasm of "Seventy Six Trombones," the joyous hustle of Professor Harold Hill, and the sentimentality of "Lida Rose." Bob Stevens' Iowa roots were deep. He valued land and woods, fields and growing crops, grained wood and a well-hung door, summer nights and Mississippi lights, a stout drink and jazz, friends and good talk. Bob had the taciturn, introspective character of the Iowa fanner well aware of the vicissitudes of nature and of life.

Bob Stevens chose Iowa State University for his undergraduate education. He first showed promise as a freshman research worker with Professor David Metzler, a biochemist, but he showed how special he really was as a sophomore student in organic chemistry. It was my privilege to teach that course. Bob met Pat Bottomley, a Home Economics major, while he was a student at Iowa State University. They were married March, 1963, and had two sons, Robert Scan and Mark Radley. The marriage was terminated by divorce in 1981. Robert Velman Stevens was graduated from Iowa State University with the Bachelor of Science degree in 1963. He chose Indiana University for graduate work because Professor Ernest Wenkert had moved there. It was at Indiana that Bob matured as a synthetic chemist and as an artist. He received the Ph.D. degree in 1966 and became a member of the faculty of Rice University the same year. After eleven years at Rice University, he joined the faculty of the University of California, Los Angeles. In 1982 Bob married Marilyn Nincevic. Robert Velman Stevens died suddenly at his home March 9, 1984. He will live forever in the minds of those who study synthesis.

The first quatrain of Baudelaire's "Le Guignon" is an appropriate tribute.

Pour soulever un poids si loud,  
Sisyphé, il foudrait ton courage!  
Bien qu'on ait du coeur l'ouvrage,  
L'Art est long et le temps est court.

Orville L. Chapman  
*January 1985*

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