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Eulogy. Michael Latham

Let us now praise a famous man



*Editor's note. Michael Latham, a champion of public health nutrition for half a century, with a special commitment to Africa, malnutrition, human rights, and breastfeeding, died last month. The inaugural issue of **World Nutrition**, published a year ago, carried his commentary 'The great vitamin A fiasco', and this year we published his commentary co-authored with Urban Jonsson, Elisabeth Sterken and George Kent, on ready-to-use therapeutic foods and their potential disastrous impact on the economies of impoverished countries and on breastfeeding. This eulogy includes contributions from fifteen of the very many hundreds of people who Michael directly inspired, who will always remember him, and who will ensure his immortality in their work, commitment and vision.*

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Michael and World Nutrition

Our founding father

Barrie Margetts and Geoffrey Cannon write:

The world in general, and Africa particularly, is a better place than it otherwise would have been, because of Michael Latham: who he was, and what he did. All the eulogies published here, testify to Michael's profound example to us all, and to his abiding example and influence. Much of what follows, assembled with love, is written in the present tense, because Michael abides in those he affected. This first eulogy here is on just one recent aspect of his impact.

Michael is a founding father of **World Nutrition**. In 2009, before we began our home page that October, after discussions and agreement at our Council we planned an on-line journal 'in due course'. In early 2010 we continued to hesitate. A journal, even when embedded within a website, would be a lot of work. Michael then offered us a commentary which, he explained, would be severely critical of universal vitamin A supplementation. Its title, 'The great vitamin A fiasco', resonating with a former time of high politics in global nutrition policy, came readily to mind.

We had three choices. We might have said with regrets that we did not have the capacity. We could have published the commentary as if it was a home page item. Or we had the choice to go for it, which is what we did. 'If not now, when?' we decided. Michael, with Ted Greiner, who he regarded as his co-author, worked with us on the text up to 30 April. On the button, at 0001 GMT on 1 May 2010, we launched volume 1 number 1, with its 45 pages plus pdf facility – the *WN* manifesto. Michael's commentary, and a linked editorial. In the next week, the number of page sessions of our website with *WN* multiplied. Michael's thesis immediately become the topic of debate and review within relevant UN agencies, national governments and their agencies, foundations and universities. A year later it remains one of the *WN* contributions that is most accessed. In terms of quality as well as quantity, the impact of Michael's commentary was and now remains phenomenal.

In our second issue the next month we published over 40 pages of short communications and letters from over 20 correspondents from all over the world, including long supportive pieces from giants in international public health nutrition such as Colothur Gopalan from India and Soerkirnan and colleagues from Indonesia. Some of these were responses to courteous but firm email requests from Michael himself. In October the *WN* commentary was a rejoinder to Michael from Alfred Sommer, Rolf Klemm and Keith West of the Bloomberg School of Public Health at

Johns Hopkins. More letters followed, notably from Asia, as before overwhelmingly sympathetic with or supportive of Michael's position.

For Michael this was merely the beginning of the beginning. What he wanted was action: change in the public interest, and also recognition and protection of what is already precious. In that mode, he approached us late last year with a proposal for a new commentary, this time on ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF). He explained his thesis. RUTF has value in treatment of severe acute malnutrition, but must not be used to prevent malnutrition. The solution is not quasi-medical intervention, but includes extended exclusive breastfeeding, safe water, treatment for infestation (one of Michael's abiding themes, from his long experience as a physician and public health leader in East Africa), and sustainable national and local food systems.

Why, in his 83rd year, was he determined to prepare and write another challenging commentary on a crucial food and nutrition policy issue, this time working with Urban Jonsson, Elisabeth Sterken and George Kent as co-authors? We sensed that he knew it was time for one more testament. We also sensed that what he needed was not publication in a journal that would subject his thesis and that of his co-authors to cautious and perhaps doubting or opposing peer review, but to a journal whose commitment was, as ours is, to clarify and amplify the views of its authors.

In February, after the commentary was drafted and was at editing stage, he asked that Urban take over as corresponding author. He explained that he was feeling unwell, and would need to be admitted to hospital as a patient for the first time in his life. On publication, as before, an email arrived, full of thanks and encouragement.

If it had not been for Michael, we might now still be wondering when to begin to publish **World Nutrition**. With Michael, our launch was a vision become real, because of the impact of his first commentary. *WN* was taken seriously in high places right from the start. This began with Michael, because he, with his radical and challenging vision, was taken seriously, up to head of UN agency level, and in many countries up to head of state level.

'Was'. The present tense will also remain correct. His principles, vision, and commitment to the people, remain a guiding light. What Michael stands for, continues to inspire, encourage, invigorate and empower people in every type of circumstance, beginning with the Tanzanian villagers blessed with his presence. For us in the World Public Health Nutrition Association, he will always be an abiding spirit.

Barrie Margetts is president of the World Public Health Nutrition Association

*Geoffrey Cannon is an Association Council member, and editor of **World Nutrition***

Michael as professor

'What would Michael do?'

Ted Greiner writes:

Michael died on 1 April. He is mourned by his two sons Miles and Mark, his wife Lani Stephenson, and countless people and organisations who were touched by a remarkable life dedicated to serving others and to making the world a better place.

March this year was Michael's first stay in a hospital as a patient. Indeed, he seemed to lead a kind of charmed life, but the joy and love that nearly always surrounded him was just a reflection of the way Michael always saw and brought out the best in everyone he met. He could get angry, but it was always a kind of righteous indignation at attacks on people or principles he held dear.

Generations of the students he inspired in international nutrition went on, not to be only scientists, academics or technocrats, but to put into practice the visions he inspired of a better world, pursuing careers dedicated to doing something practical to redress injustice.

The enormous body of scientific literature that Michael and his students produced, is summarised in the monograph *Five Decades of International Nutrition Research and Advocacy Conducted by Professor Michael Latham and his Cornell University Colleagues and Students*, compiled by Michael himself and some of his students, in celebration of his 80th birthday. (Please use the link above to access it). Reviewing this work, on a very wide range of issues, the central theme of his career may not be readily apparent. Quite rare in the academic world, it emerges as improving the health and nutritional status of the poorest, particularly by development and employment of the human rights approach.

Born and raised in Tanzania, and with a decade of experience working as a physician, nutritionist and policy advisor there, Michael had a special love of Africa and Africans. For the first World Food Day, over 30 years ago, Michael told a special story in the Cornell University chapel. As the head of nutrition in the Tanzanian ministry of health, he had to visit the Rufiji area, then at risk of famine, to determine the causes and what best could be done to mitigate it. A sudden downpour washed out the roads and he was stranded for weeks in a village with almost no food. Though his nutritional status could tolerate this much more so than theirs, it brought tears to the eyes to hear how the villagers insisted each day that he share their food.

He published an amazing book, *Kilimanjaro Tales: the Saga of a Medical Family in Africa*, an extract of which is available on-line, consisting of his mother's diary as the wife of a colonial physician in Tanzania during the 1920s and 30s, and his own recollections

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from his time as a medical officer in various districts there in the 1960s. This love of Africa was expressed not just in his work, but in how he lived his life. Anyone who was privileged to travel with him there, saw how ministers, drivers, waiters and maids were all delighted by his fluent Swahili, and also by the way he spoke in the same gentle and kindly way to all.

One measure of the impact of such a long and successful career is that so many of his students at Cornell have gone on to impact on the field of international nutrition themselves, academically, scientifically, and in community service. When his former students get together in Ithaca, upstate New York, as we have done on several occasions over the years to honour his life and work, we share stories of how he supported and inspired us, as students and throughout our lives. We have all found ourselves in times of difficulty either consulting him, or asking ourselves: 'What would Michael do in this situation?'

Michael inspired his students to do important research on issues crucial to the health and nutrition of the poorest and most vulnerable groups in low-income countries. He then used their findings (as well as those from his own continuing research programmes, largely in East Africa) to influence programmes and policy discussions at national and international levels. This process has quietly led to major changes in how infant feeding, parasitic infection, and micronutrient deficiencies, are dealt with in modern public health nutrition programming and policymaking. More are certain to come, as his legacy lives on

Ted Greiner is one of Michael's many PhD students.

He is currently professor of nutrition at Hanyang University, Seoul, South Korea

Michael as a mentor

He is alive in the work we do

Katherine Houg writes:

It's been said that mentorship and scholarship go hand in hand, interweaving knowledge with guidance to cultivate the bright young minds of tomorrow. In the four years I have known Michael I, like so many of his students, have been inspired by his life story and passion for learning and teaching.

I met Michael during my freshman year at Cornell. Having gone through a rather rough transition, I entered my second semester uncertain about what direction I was headed. A fellow classmate approached me to participate in Project Kenya, an HIV-AIDS nutrition education programme in Bungoma, Kenya, in association with

ICODEI, a local civil society organisation (<http://volunteerkenya.org/>) and I made the leap to explore this project.

Based on recommendations of the previous team leaders (Betsy Wonderly '08 and Annie Kearns '09), our team approached Michael to be our advisor for the programme and he immediately accepted. We were instantly drawn to his wit, deep knowledge of international nutrition, and most of all, his dynamic energy and passion for student initiatives.

Michael was there for each and every one of our meetings, helping us brainstorm ideas, craft a comprehensive curriculum, and offer little bits of wisdom along the way. The eight of us (Amanda Messinger '07, Kathryn Mosso '08, Andrea Gaul '08, Antony Kironji '10, Vinay Patel '10, Nwanyinma Nnodum '08, and Hannah Schinbeckler '10) remember these sessions fondly.

After the trip, Michael became my 'unofficial' advisor and mentor when I helped to compile the monograph of his 40 years of work for his 80th birthday celebration, *Five Decades of International Nutrition Research and Advocacy Conducted by Professor Michael Latham and his Cornell University Colleagues and Students*. With others I read through and organised dozens of his papers and essays, and got a better sense of who he was as a researcher and activist. Toward the end of my senior year, I was also able to assist Michael with another literature review, on vitamin A supplementation.

Our weekly meetings are a memory I hold on to dearly. While we discussed aspects of my research, he never failed to ask about my family, about my university experience, about my thoughts on current events and politics, and about my future. When I told him that I was unsure of what I wanted to do after graduation, he wrote to the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action and inquired about their programmes and whether WABA could help me gain some experience at its secretariat in Penang, Malaysia. When he mentioned that he would financially sponsor the internship, I was taken aback. Why me? What will I have to offer? This kind gesture was for me life-changing, and I am touched by his immense generosity. My experience in WABA and Penang thus far has been extraordinary. I can now understand the urgency with which Michael prodded me to go and truly experience the sense of camaraderie the breastfeeding movement has established around the globe.

Even though Michael is no longer with us, he is very much alive in the work we all do for international nutrition. I continue to be encouraged by his words and smiling face. He inspired countless students to believe in themselves, listen to the stories of others, and share their truths with empathy and integrity.

*Katherine Houng is one of Michael Latham's students.
She is currently an intern at the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action*

Nwanyinma Nnodum adds:

In Nigeria, when a great person passes, there is a period of wailing and tears for the loss. That period is followed by a great celebration of joy and thankfulness for all that person accomplished for the community and the world. Dr Latham did so much, and his legacy is that he will continue to change lives for many years to come.

So though many have sorrow at his passing, I feel the bittersweet joy and thankfulness to have had the brief opportunity to have met and benefited from his wisdom through my service learning project – Project Kenya. Dr. Latham was a great man with keen humour, unexpected humility, and vast wisdom and passion. I only pray that I may accomplish just some of what Dr Latham has done in his lifetime. His family is in my thoughts and prayers.

Antony Kironji adds:

For someone with so many titles after his name, he was a very humble man. He treated me, a mere undergraduate, with the same degree of respect, and valued my opinions with the same degree of seriousness, as he did colleagues that were his equals. My last memory of him was during graduation when he met my family. We spoke for quite a while about the political condition of Kenya, and how much the country had changed since he was last there. Already I miss him and his greeting, every time when I walked into his office, the Swahaki ‘Jambo!’ as he embraced me.

Yuliya Tipograf adds:

Dr. Latham is the reason I am going into global health, and getting my MD as well as my MPH. He always made time for all of his students, whether they were PhDs or lowly undergraduates like me. Even when I was across the world in Kenya, he still made time to chat and to help me figure out my thesis. He was a good friend whose door was always open.

Michael and Tanzania

Dedication and delight

Olivia Yambi writes:

Michael was at Cornell a professor in its department of International Nutrition, and he was also much, much more. He touched my life profoundly. On completion of my first degree in biology in 1973, I read a book he had authored, *Human Nutrition in Tropical Africa*. This had been published in 1965 by the UN Food and Agriculture

Organization, with support from UNICEF and WHO. It changed my career path. It influenced my decision to work with the Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre (TFNC), and to pursue further studies in the field of nutrition.

Michael's love for Tanzania was unparalleled. He was after all born in Tanzania (in 1928 in Kilosa, a rural district). He was the first national medical officer for nutrition in post-independence Tanzania. And he did this out of choice, demonstrating his commitment to contribute to nation building.

He wrote in his book *Kilimanjaro Tales*: 'I chose to remain in Tanzania after it gained Uhuru (independence) and during my last three years worked happily for the government of Julius Nyerere, serving for much of the time as director of the nutrition unit in the Ministry of Health in Dar es Salaam. It was very satisfying to be helping a fledging new government that was very genuinely trying to conquer poverty, ignorance and disease'.

He worked in Tanzania for nine years, conducting research on various aspects of nutrition, and advised government and students. He visited Tanzania many times after this. I met him for the first time in the mid 1970s, and decided then to study nutrition at Cornell. He was my main advisor for both my master's and doctoral studies. His greatest delight was to see his students return to their home countries and contribute to national development.

Michael was very generous with his time. My family and I had the privilege of spending quality time with him whenever he was in East Africa, be it on boat trips to Mbudya Island outside Dar es Salaam, or long discussions on politics and developments in nutrition in Tanzania. He participated in a meeting on Hunger and Society around the launch of the Iringa Joint Nutrition Support Programme in 1983, and returned for a follow-up meeting in 2003 to review what had happened in the interceding 20 years. Michael spoke Swahili, and liked to tell the story of fishermen who were looking forward to owning fishing dhows and eventually to enjoying a relaxed life under the coconut trees, many times. We met last at the ICN in Bangkok in November 2009. As usual he was in the forefront, mobilising all Cornellians for a get together.

Michael has always been a symbol of commitment, solidarity, and public action. During what turned out to be the last week of his life, I thought I would cheer him up with a reminder of times we spent together, and I wrote to his family:

'Tell Michael we care for him, we love him and we accompany him as he struggles through. Remind him that many years ago, must be in the early 1980s, my family visited him and Lani on the coast south of Mombasa. We had so much fun together, and enjoyed the wonderful coastal food at Ali Baba's cave restaurant. I trust that he will regain his appetite so we can plan for a meal at Ali Baba's'.

And so we will never have another meal together at Ali Baba's. But I am thankful for the many years of friendship and benefitting from his guidance. Throughout his life he was a genuine friend of Tanzania. In my heart he lives for ever. May His Soul Rest in Eternal Peace!

*Olivia Yambi is one of Michael Latham's PhD students.
She is head of UNICEF in Kenya.*

Godwin Ndossi adds:

During the mid 1990s Michael, Deborah Ash (then one of Michael's graduate students) and I travelled to Mpwapwa in the Dodoma region of Tanzania on several occasions, accompanied by a team of staff from the Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre. This was a six hour drive from Dar es Salaam, and part of the road was unpaved. We were doing a study on the efficacy of a fortified micronutrient drink among schoolchildren. During those trips Michael told us of his many experiences working as a medical doctor in Dodoma and Kilosa (he also worked in many other parts of Tanzania) and his knowledge of the local people and their customs was just phenomenal. Michael would easily pull a crowd of older people as he would schoolchildren, engaging them on issues that mattered to them. He spent many hours examining children for all sorts of health conditions and providing on-the-spot advice to local medical teams. Michael often brought small presents for children and they just loved him! One afternoon while walking around in a small township Michael started a conversation with local people riding their bicycles, and within minutes one of them had let Michael take a ride on his bicycle, to our amazement!

*Godwin Ndossi is one of Michael Latham's PhD students.
He is head of the Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre.*

Michael as an organiser

Building capacity in Africa

**Joseph Ashong, Dia Sanou, and Reginald Annan write
on behalf of the African Graduate Nutrition Students Network (AGS Net):**

Michael Latham's dedication to improve health and nutrition in Africa knew no boundaries. Some of the founders of the African Graduate Nutrition Students Network (AGSNet) 'passed through his hands' when he was director of the international nutrition programme at Cornell. He influenced us to form AGSNet to serve as a platform to bring together all Africans studying nutrition and nutrition-

related subjects to work together to contribute to the fight against malnutrition on the African continent.

Professor Latham identified with the African students in Cornell's department of nutrition science, motivated them to excel individually, and encouraged them to work to influence the nutrition situation in Africa. Since the official inauguration of AGSNet 2005 at the 18th International Congress of Nutrition in Durban, South Africa, he continued to offer advice and encouragement to successive leaders of the network.

In recognition of his immense contribution to nutrition and health in Africa, in 2007 he was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award for Advancing Nutrition in Africa at the 2nd Congress of AGSNet in Casablanca, Morocco. This award recognises the contribution of individuals throughout their lives to improving nutrition in Africa. Professor Latham improved the nutrition and well-being of Africans, through building the capacity of the workforce and furthering the understanding of the science of nutrition in the African context. It is important to us that he always referred to his earlier years working as a bush doctor in Tanzania his birth country, as among his best years. He was truly African.

Many members of AGSNet have fond memories of Professor Latham, addressing the young leaders and interacting with us after our congress. For most of us who had only interacted with him through his books and papers as students studying nutrition, meeting him face to face and interacting with him was incredible and wonderful. We were dumbfounded to meet a man of such stature who was so humble and open to all.

I have many fond memories of Professor Latham (writes Joseph Ashong). On two special occasions he congratulated me. The first time was after a presentation at the Programme in International Nutrition seminar at Cornell. The second time was after a presentation on capacity building using the AGSNet concept at the 35th UN SCN meeting in Hanoi, Vietnam. Both times, he walked up to me and said 'That was very good, keep it up'. He had a way of encouraging us on. He asked me to stand on a counter in a bar somewhere in Hanoi to sing Ghana's national anthem because that day, 6 March, was Ghana's Independence Day and I am Ghanaian. When I have knocked on his door for help both personally and for AGSNet, he always made time to assist me or direct me to the appropriate persons or places.

I must say this about Professor Latham (writes Jacqueline Kung'u, a former student of Michael) He mentored me in my first 703. These oral presentations were so feared, because you got grilled by faculty and students, but the point was to make you a very good communicator of scientific research. I think I must have been so bad, because he literally went through all my slides with me like three times over, and virtually got me to memorise everything! Anyways, he was a gem. Let's keep his flame burning in Africa.

We are sad at the loss of such a wonderful person, yet we are happy that he achieved so much of what he wanted to do. At AGSNet, the greatest tribute to him will be to keep upholding his legacy in Africa. May his soul rest in perfect peace!

Joseph Ashong is one of Michael Latham's PhD students. He is AGSNet co-ordinator

Dia Sanou is an Association member.

Reggie Annan is an Association Council member and writes a monthly column for our website

Michael and breastfeeding

'This professor at Cornell'

Annelies Allain writes:

I knew about 'this professor at Cornell' long before I ever met Michael. In our struggle to implement the International Code on the Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes round the world, we had met several of his former students who had become convinced that there was more to breastfeeding than nutritional composition, that bottle feeding was causing malnutrition and morbidity, that one cannot leave nutrition to scientists and food companies, that the Nestle Boycott was a driving force in the protection of breastfeeding, and that the Code was essential to improve infant health.

These Cornell students who had gone back to their countries to become heads of hospitals and policy makers in ministries became instant supporters of the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) campaigns. They were in tune with the strategic thinking: unless we stop the multi-million dollar competition, breastfeeding promotion does not stand a chance. Just one example of one of Michael's students was Natividad Clavano, who among other actions closed the doors of her hospital in the Philippines to company representatives, tore down the commercial posters, did not accept samples or any sponsorship, focussed on exclusive breastfeeding before it became fashionable, and saw amazing result. Babies survived, infection declined, no sepsis, and so forth.

When I first saw Michael at a UNICEF meeting in New York in 1991, I was not impressed. He looked so ordinary. But once he started talking and chairing meetings, I realised that he was a powerhouse of scientific and social knowledge, of ideas and conviction. He was tenacious, never gave up, and was inspiring, comforting and fun.

Later that evening in 1991, after the official meeting with James Grant, then Executive Director of UNICEF, we met in a basement Chinese restaurant and collectively gave

birth to WABA, the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action. We visioned how it would galvanise both the medical profession as well as ordinary people from all walks of life about the benefits of breastfeeding. How it would make all hospitals baby-friendly by applying the Ten Steps. The Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative would complement the Code. Michael and Derrick Jelliffe had us rolling under the table with laughter by dancing to the very first 'WABA Crawl' with a Caribbean jingle, imitating how a newborn baby naturally finds its way crawling to the breast, to nutrition, to well-being and happiness.

Over the next decades I met up with Michael at many meetings and events, and always received advice and new inspiration for coping with struggles ahead. Michael was steadfast, a wise friend, a knowledgeable supporter of both IBFAN and WABA, with a tremendous sense of humour. He had African roots, hands-on experience in third world hospitals, and resonated instantly with colleagues from the South.

In 2008, he gave the keynote address at a WABA Partners' meeting in Penang, Malaysia. For many of us, his explanation of how ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) was becoming a threat to continued breastfeeding from 6 to 24 months was alarming. Michael said that RUTF is ideal for the treatment of severe acute malnutrition, and is a major advance over the mixes used in the past to treat kwashiorkor and nutritional marasmus. But, he warned, there is now a move to start using RUTF for prevention of malnutrition in a massive way. And that, he said, is a huge leap. It's like a vast truck out of control careening down a hill without brakes.

Turning RUTF into RUF (Ready-to-Use Food) at community level is potentially 'enormously profitable for corporations poised to manufacture RUF in the hope that UN agencies, the World Bank, and a host of international NGOs will purchase large amounts', said Michael. It is a further step into commercialising infant feeding, and a move away from local and national food security. If a child gets a regular dose of free Plumpy'nut™ and other commercial RUTF and RUF, there is no need for continued breastfeeding or for family foods. But nothing is free forever, dependency is quickly built (don't we know that with infant formula), there are endless problems with logistics even while still in project stage, and in the medium and long run, RUF will have a very negative impact on local agriculture. But a profitable market will have been created. Are we going to let it happen?

I hope that Michael's warnings will continue to ring in many ears, as they do in mine. His clear thinking and writings should echo in nutrition and sociology courses around the world and survive him for decades to come. Thank you, Michael, for all you gave. We miss you.

Annelies Allain works with the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN).

Michael as a leader

In and out of New York and Africa

Claudio Schuftan writes:

Michael and I go back to somewhere in the mid seventies. I think from the defunct Western Hemisphere Nutrition Congresses. I was working in Nashville at the time. He mentioned to me that they had an opening in his department for an assistant professor – would I be interested? Michael had been very outspoken about the military coup in Chile, my country of birth, and knew I was a young colleague just coming from there. My wife Aviva was quite happy about the prospect, but only until she found out the job was in Ithaca in upstate New York. Snow for six months? Not a nice prospect for a girl from South-East Asia...

I told her it was a great opportunity for me, I should apply and go for an interview if asked. So I did, in October, the time of the beautiful fall. Interviews went well and as a bonus, I got to meet Jean-Pierre Habicht. What did not go well was the weather. We had four days of rain and chilling cold. Not a good preview for my wife. So I had a change of heart...I did not get an offer anyway. The contact served for us to stay in touch though. Not too long afterwards I was able to contribute a chapter on the causes of hunger, along with Urban Jonsson, Susan George and others, in the *Cornell International Nutrition Monograph Series* that Michael created and edited.

A few years later, while I was on a consultancy in Dar es Salaam, I ran into Michael in the lobby of the hotel. We were both hurrying to meetings and decided to see each other again after work. He was exploring the potential value of a proposed commercial micronutrient supplement. We had dinner together at the hotel and he told me he had scheduled a visit to his old friend Jane Goodall, of chimps fame the next morning, if I would like to come along... Wouldn't I...? I cancelled meetings and promptly went with him. Jane lived in a very Spartan home in Dar and she served us the unfailing British cup of tea with biscuits. They talked mostly about past shared memories...not much about chimpanzees.

Michael also talked highly of Joan Wickens, the British personal secretary of the late Mwalimu Nyerere whom he also knew well. She has been credited with writing a good part of President Nyerere's speeches. I asked for her in her office in Dar, but she was travelling. A year later, on a return trip to Tanzania, I was able to meet this truly amazing by then old lady with a fiery yet gentle character and a piercing gaze. I will always remember her.

In the late eighties our family lived in Nairobi. I heard that Michael and Lani his wife were in Diani Beach continuing their research based in the Mombasa area of Kenya – their seminal work on de-worming and nutritional status, it turned out. We visited them. They had rented a cottage by the beach and lived a very simple life devoted to not much more than the research. We got a tour of one of the bedrooms that had been transformed into a makeshift lab...for stool examinations... We had lunch with them in the terrace facing the palmy beach and the Indian Ocean. We talked a little bit about everything. Michael told us that one of the seven summits over 5000 metres of Mawenzi in the Mount Kilimanjaro range is named Latham Peak, in honour of his father.

For years and years, Michael had had a secret long-term project to work on the manuscript of his mother Gwynneth's memoirs. He never quite got to the handwritten diaries to do some needed editing. For one of his birthdays Lani had a surprise present for him: She had paid Beverly Hastings, a secretary at Cornell, to turn a manuscript of 350 pages into over 200 pages of typescript. With such a bonanza, Michael found time in 1990 during a sabbatical to introduce and edit them, into the book: *Kilimanjaro Tales. The Saga of a Medical Family in Africa*, by Gwynneth and Michael Latham, published in 1995. It is a fascinating account of his family's life in rural Tanzania.

Michael once had a personal interview with Fidel. A strange mini-epidemic of some kind of optic nerve neuropathy had cropped up in Cuba. Nobody could figure out what was causing it. Somebody suggested it might have a nutrition etiology. That is what Fidel wanted to know from Michael, who was surely impressed by the level of knowledge Fidel had and of the incisiveness of his questions.

The last time Aviva and I saw Michael was in Melbourne last August at the 63rd annual UN Department of Public Information conference, titled 'Advance Global Health'. I commented to her that Michael 'was getting old', not in his intellect, but in his appearance. He was still jovial as always, but perhaps his speech (with the characteristic drawl) was a bit slower, though just as emphatic. He talked energetically about the need to identify and denounce the *Vitamin Afiasco*, following his **World Nutrition** commentary. Although not personally an expert, I listened to his arguments and then fully agreed with him. The rest is history.

Claudio Schuftan is a member of the steering council of the Peoples' Health Movement

Michael's philosophy and politics **The committed scholar**

Urban Jonsson writes:

In April 1977 I attended a conference on nutrition planning in San Francisco as a member of the Tanzania government delegation. When the chairman, a well-known nutrition scholar, requested the Tanzania delegation to make its presentation and the head of the delegation asked me to make the presentation, the chairman said: 'But he is white!' The head of the delegation responded: 'In Tanzania we do not see any difference between black, white and brown, as you do in this country'. After the presentation, a smiling person came up to me and said 'I am so proud of you – and so proud of Tanzania'. He introduced himself as – Michael Latham.

During the same conference a number of some more radical participants criticised the dominance of the USAID approach to nutrition planning and decided to arrange a parallel workshop. The students at the university helped to arrange a room, a time was set and the workshop announced. At the time for our workshop Michael was chairing the plenary session of the conference and when he heard about our workshop said something like 'that meeting is more important than ours, let's go there', packed up and came to our meeting, with many of the plenary participants following him. The three of us organising the workshop included Claudio Schuftan and Thierry Brun, who both became life-long friends of Michael and me after that.

It is often said that the first impression of a person can be misleading, which indeed is often true. However my first impression of Michael on that day in San Francisco was absolutely correct: radical, courageous, curious, and trusting younger people. Michael has played a very important role in the life for many of us. For me he was always ready to help out, for example by chairing a crucial meeting I had arranged when I was working with the United Nations University in Tokyo, which saved the first draft of the 'food, health, care' conceptual framework; participating in and publishing the proceedings from the 'Hunger and Society' workshop in Tanzania in 1992, at the start of the Iringa Joint Nutrition Support Programme; and coming back in 2002 to attend the 'Hunger and Society – After 20 Years' workshop in the same place. His life-long experience from, commitment to, and knowledge of Tanzania contributed significantly to the success of the Iringa JNSP.

In 1988 Michael invited me to a four-month sabbatical stay at Cornell. It was only Michael, and Jim Grant, Executive Director of UNICEF at the time - another giant in development – who did not see anything wrong with my choice of study, which was nutrition and the philosophy of science. Michael even allowed me to sit in his

office to do the work, as he and Lani were doing research at Diani Beach in Mombasa, Kenya. To my surprise and great satisfaction I found myself in *the* nutrition office, with a personal library that included everything about the history of the problem of malnutrition in developing countries.

Since my studies in the philosophy of science I often re-construct my reality in the simple two-dimensional space of Science –Ethics and Theory – Practice. Most people I know tend to end up in half of this space, say the theory and practice of science, and even only in one of these two components. I believe that a person should attempt to be in all spaces. Michael was one of the best representatives of exactly such a person.

Michael was a great scientist and his knowledge of and contribution to science is indisputable, well-known and respected by most scientists. In his scientific work he was very clear about the dialectical relationship between theory and practice. He reflected very well the famous positions that ‘science is blind without a theory’ and that ‘nothing is more practical than a good theory’. I saw that very clearly when I visited him and Lani in their research at Diani Beach in the late eighties.

Ethics, including morality and values, as expressed in religion and ideology, was as important for Michael as was science. His ideological position never influenced his scientific method as such, but definitely influenced what subjects he chose to study, investigate and understand scientifically. His work on ‘*The great vitamin A fiasco*’ and most recently our work on the use and misuse of ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) are good examples of this practice. He also firmly believed that scientists are also human beings and therefore must have a position on all the injustice, exploitation and xenophobia that takes place in the world. He was very outspoken with his views on Pinochet in Chile, the US Vietnam war, the war in Iraq, and many other issues in the world. He helped organise demonstrations at Cornell University, a clear reflection of his conviction the ethics, like science, must be addressed both in theory and in practice.

All those of us to have had the privilege of knowing Michael have learned a lot from him. I have learned from Michael to stand up for what I believe in; to respect the dignity of all persons, including persons who do not agree with you; and also non-racism and the importance of a life-long genuine friendship. Thank you, Michael.

Urban Jonsson is former chief of nutrition, UNICEF.

Michael as a living legend **He makes us think**

Geoffrey Cannon writes:

Compared with others whose testimonies appear here, I knew Michael much less well. I hope this note also speaks for the countless people and organisations who were in contact with Michael just a few times, but who he continues to inspire. Michael made me think, and more than that, he made me change my mind and see wider aspects of reality. Why has he had this effect on countless people? It was partly because he had a full understanding of the scope and purpose of food and nutrition. This isn't the same as saying he was always right; nobody is. For decades he was a leader of international nutrition, the title of his Cornell department. After years working with the people and also at the highest level in Tanzania, his country of birth, he retained his friendships with people from every type of background in East Africa. But knowledge wasn't the main thing. As those who know him best testify, what he wrote and spoke and stood and campaigned for, was done in his way, with integrity, vision, and his genius at getting to the main point, and staying with it. His tenure at Cornell was crucial.

Each of the half-dozen times in the last 20 years I had a significant interchange with Michael, he influenced my life. The first time was in 1992, when he invited me to give a series of lectures to the Cornell faculty, indicating that they could be published in the *Cornell International Nutrition Monograph Series*. My own doubts about my grasp of my topics, including asserting that the human race would be better off relatively short as well as light, were massively reinforced by a reviewer, who said: 'I would not recommend publication of his lectures in the monograph series, since this would, in my opinion, reflect poorly on the scientific reputation of past and future issues'. Suicides have been occasioned by less contemptuous put-downs. Michael rescued me from despair, with a handwritten note expressing 'my admiration for your presentations and my belief in the importance of your views being more widely shared', and with a long typewritten note suggesting revisions. This was despite my assertions being contrary to his well-based views.

Another time was in 1997 during an INCAP conference in Guatemala City. Michael came in late to a session on tropical malnutrition in which he was billed, apologised (he may have been lobbying the Minister of Health on breastfeeding), produced one slide, and spoke to it. The slide showed the result of a young East African girl's treatment for infestation. This was a picture of a basin full of worms, looking like a big plate of live spaghetti. We gasped. We got the point. Michael never believed that the main answer to malnutrition in the classic sense is just more food or nutrients. What children within impoverished countries need above all, are parents who are

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able to look after them, basic primary health care, a return to extended exclusive breastfeeding, safe water, decent sanitation – and de-worming. Michael always stayed with this evangelism, and he knew what he was talking about, beginning with his work as a country doctor in Tanzania.

Barrie Margetts and I write about a third time, of working with Michael in this last year, at the beginning of these eulogies. Always when I work on **World Nutrition**, Michael is on my mind. Just now I have looked through the file of many emails he sent as successive drafts of his inaugural commentary were being prepared.

Here is part of one. ‘I have seen both your replies. I understand that it would be useful to have data on incidence of serious xerophthalmia and blindness now compared with the 1970s. I do think therefore that we should add a sentence saying "Most nutritionists, physicians and others concerned with vitamin A deficiency have over the last several years almost universally expressed their certainty that serious xerophthalmia and resulting blindness are very rare now compared with in the 1970s. We have heard this strong statement from leaders in India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Indonesia, Tanzania and Kenya to name a few countries”.’ He continued: ‘Alternatively (but not before April 13) a message could be sent to people like Gopalan in India; Solon in the Philippines; Soekirnan in Indonesia; Roy or Talukder in Bangladesh; Ndossi in Tanzania; Kinoti from Kenya, simply asking their view. Or "how would you compare what you believe the incidence of blinding xerophthalmia is now compared with in the 1960s and 1970s?”.’ Very Michael, that email, energetic, determined, tenacious, insistent, courteous, and using his vast network of colleagues who are his friends, admirers and followers.

My final time with Michael in person was on the last evening of the Porto world public health nutrition conference last September. Of it I wrote: ‘One special pleasure was inviting Michael Latham and Walter Willett out to supper at an *al fresco* seafood restaurant chosen by Walter on the *Muro dos Bacalhoeiros* (the ‘Embankment of the Cod Fishermen’). Boats loaded with salted cod from the Newfoundland banks moored under where we were sitting, at first some decades before Christobal Colón “discovered America”. Michael and Walter are both professors at US universities, and both have deep experience of working in Tanzania – but had never before sat down to a meal together. Over *polvo* or *sardinhas*, (octopus or sardines) washed down with a bottle of chilled *vinho verde* and *água com gas* (white wine and fizzy water), they reminisced about the same Tanzanian dirt roads they had travelled, and the same lakeside rest-houses they had stayed in – but at different times’. We toasted one another, too. ‘This is to you, Michael. Thank you. May you live for ever’. And so he will, in our minds, work and lives.

*Geoffrey Cannon is an Association Council member and editor of **World Nutrition***

Michael on Michael

A life completed

Michael's member's profile, first posted in May 2010, follows. It will remain posted in the Association member's section with a note of his death.

I was born in Tanzania where my father was a doctor. From early childhood my goal was always to attend medical school and then to return to Tanzania to do the kind of exciting and humanitarian medical and public health work that as a schoolboy in Africa I saw my father doing. I achieved that ambition, and to this day I think that my most meaningful, educational and significant job was in the six years I spent as a 'Bush Doctor' running a hospital, doing surgery, obstetrics, and everything, and being responsible for the public health services in a large district.

This also was my introduction to nutrition. I conducted and published research on the control of anaemia, and I worked on a multi-disciplinary applied nutrition project in remote Songea District. As director of the nutrition unit I was overseer, and in charge of all nutrition activities in Julius Nyerere's new government. In Dar es Salaam I was considered to be the founder of the International School of Tanganyika, and served as the first Chairman of its Board of Directors. This was the first non-racial school in Tanzania, and it has continued to thrive.

My political awakening came when as an 18 year old medical student I participated in an anti-nuke rally in Trafalgar Square in London where the main speaker was Bertrand Russell. I have remained an activist. I led and was arrested for anti-apartheid demonstrations at Cornell, and was much involved there, with Daniel Berrigan and others, against the Vietnam war. I have for many years been very involved in activities and writings on human rights to food, adequate nutrition, and health.

I am a medical doctor with graduate degrees in Public Health (MPH, Harvard University) and Tropical Medicine (London University), with internationally recognised expertise in the major nutritional problems of economically developing countries. In research, teaching and public service I have been particularly involved with breastfeeding, infant and child health; parasitic infections and their relationship to health; micronutrient deficiencies especially iron deficiency anaemias and vitamin A deficiency; and also nutrition and human rights. In collaborative research demonstrating the impact of intestinal helminths and schistosomiasis on nutritional status and health, Dr. Lani Stephenson, my wife and colleague, was often the principal investigator.

For ten years I worked in Tanzania as a physician, and then as Director of the Ministry of Health Nutrition Unit. Then for 25 years I served as director of the

Program in International Nutrition at Cornell University, which during this period grew into the largest most widely recognised such programme at any university in the US; and then as Professor of International Nutrition until 2004 and now as a graduate school professor, emeritus professor and international professor. I am the author of several books, and over 400 published chapters or papers.

At Cornell I have been the mentor and advisor to over 100 graduate students, mostly PhDs, many of whom have moved on to important careers in international nutrition all over the world. I am still much involved with graduate students in international nutrition; occasional teaching both undergraduates and graduates; research mainly in Africa; and public service including work with United Nation agencies.

Over the years I have conducted research on many topics relevant to international nutrition. Among these have been many studies on young child feeding, intestinal parasitic infections, and interventions to reduce Vitamin A deficiencies and anaemia. I have taken a leading role in policy related to breastfeeding and HIV/AIDS. This recently included an African four-country study for UNICEF and major talks in Vienna, Venezuela, Washington, Boston, Alabama, Antwerp, Durban and Vancouver, to mention a few.

British citizen, and now recently also a dual UK-US citizen. MPH Harvard, DTM&H London University, MD Dublin University. Professor of International Nutrition at Cornell University, 1968-2004, since then Emeritus and International Professor. Areas of expertise include medicine, public health, international nutrition, tropical medicine, child health, breastfeeding, micronutrient deficiencies.

In 1965 I was appointed OBE for distinguished service in Tanzania. In 1992 was awarded the Gopalan Oration Gold Medal. In 1993 was the first recipient of the Kellogg International Nutrition Prize of Society for International Nutrition Research of the American Society of Nutritional Sciences. In 1995 was given the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action Award for outstanding contributions to WABA and breastfeeding. In 1996 was visiting professor, University of Oslo, Norway, and in 1999 adjunct professor, Laval University, Canada. In 2005 was presented with Lifetime Achievement Award by the American Public Health Association. In 2008 received the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition Order of Merit. In 2009 I became identified as a Living Legend at the International Conference on Nutrition in Bangkok.