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Andrew Vazsonyi, 1916-2003

## The Specialist With a Universal Mind: Mentor, Collaborator, Friend

by Nancy Weida, Bucknell University



Laura and Andy Vazsonyi with their daughter, Bobbi, and son-in-law, Sky Chaney. In late January 2004, Laura passed away after a long illness.

My father was a scholar, mathematician, and scientist. He loved spending his days reading, writing, and working at his computer. He had diverse interests that took his mind in many directions, always contemporary, often ahead of his time. Since his death, I have received e-mails from all over the world honoring his life. One of my favorites read, "When I met Andy at an ORSA/TIMS meeting in the early 1990's, he struck me as the youngest mind in the room. This, in spite of the fact that he was twice as old as everyone else there." Several days before he "left" my father told me he had lived a good life and was ready to go at any time. He recently published his autobiography, *Which Door Has the Cadillac: Adventures of a Real Life Mathematician*, available on amazon.com and Barnes & Noble. He spent his last day healthy and doing the things he loved. I mourn his death but celebrate his life. He was a wonderful, loving father.

--Bobbi Chaney

The Specialist with a Universal Mind has shared his last column with us.

Andrew Vazsonyi, feature editor of this column, died of a massive stroke on November 13, 2003. We had hoped he would attend our annual meeting this past November in Washington D.C. and sign copies of his marvelous memoirs, *Which Door Has the Cadillac: Adventures of a Real-Life Mathematician*, but sadly, this was not to be.

As we've known from his challenging, provocative, and insightful columns that appeared in this spot in each issue of *Decision Line* for more than a decade, Andy was an "internationally recognized author, researcher and educator... and author of over 70 technical articles, and seven textbooks, in English, German, Spanish, French, Russian, Japanese and Hungarian." In his last months he focused on "books, articles, and his website... that apply Microsoft Excel and Visual Basic to the decision sciences including healthcare systems."

But he was so much more than this short blurb reprinted next to each "Specialist with a Universal Mind" *Decision Line* column. He was a true pioneer, and until his last hours, was always reading and conceptualizing, and thinking forward. His work and influence knew no boundaries, from the decision sciences (for example, through his many papers and books; as a fellow in DSI; as the first past president of TIMS, and the only past president to have never served as president—a great story in itself) to mathematics (for example, Andy is the "Weiszfeld" of the 1934 Weiszfeld Algorithm, which finds the point that minimizes the sum of the distances from  $N$  given points, used today in location theory) to engineering (for example, helping to save the critically important P-51 Mustang plane in the 1940s) to life (telling stories, working, and inspiring others).

One of Andy's goals with his memoirs and his Web site at <http://www.reallifemath.com/>

was to share the wonders of mathematical modeling and reasoning with the masses in such relevant scenarios as financial planning and healthcare. He was one of the first to recognize the importance of the spreadsheet in helping to accomplish this task. Pieces on his Web site include "Decision Sciences Picture Book," "Ten-Minute Mathematician," and "Tyranny and Magic of Formulas." From his Web site:

Many people realize that their lives are played out in a world of numbers and mathematics. But how many people know how to take advantage of math in their everyday life?

This Website provides a user-friendly key to unlock the mystery of mathematics to the non-mathematical mind.

By taking advantage of the magic of the computer, math can help resolve issues in your day-to-day world.

Andy Vazsonyi was my mentor and inspiration from the beginning of my postdoctoral career. From our book-writing to papers to presentations, my fondest memories are of our many long and interesting telephone and e-mail conversations where he helped me to think broadly and creatively, and reminded me to have fun, by adding "paprika" to my life and work. We challenged each other, and enjoyed each other. He was a man whose love of life and learning was unparalleled. It was his sense of whimsy and keen intellect that made him the wonderful character he was. I will always be able to see that wonderful twinkle in his eye. Thankfully, he left us his memoirs, papers, books, Web site, stories and anecdotes, so we can continue to be a part of his exciting world. His spirit and ingenuity live on. ■

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