This Saturday I started working on my HDFS blog submission about “how not to refer to older people as ‘cute’”. Just a few hours later I heard that my former office-next-door friend and colleague, Randy Jones, had passed away from a heart attack.

For those that didn’t get a chance to know Randy, he was a faculty member in our department for many years and retired just two years ago. He studied adolescence, served as the graduate coordinator for a long time, and he had an impressive research career, including winning prestigious awards like the Graduate Mentor award for the university in 2009.

My mind has been on Randy ever since, and he is far more interesting than anything I could say about gerontology. So I scrapped the academic story and decided to write about a person who has left his mark on our department. This story, in no way, claims that “the Randy story” is my story; I don’t claim the topic. He was close to many of us, and “Randy stories” exist from long before I knew him. I hope this piece is one of many about him. I hope people comment on their own memories. Grief is an experience that somehow feels better when we all talk together. So here goes…. I’ll start.

Randy Jones, according to Beth Fauth:

By all first impressions, I should not have liked Randy Jones. When I came for my job talk as an unexperienced, recent PhD graduate from the other side of the country, everyone seemed so nice. But Randy looked fairly unimpressed in the audience, and he asked me very pointed questions about the probability statistics I presented in my research tables. The questions were not unfair; they just caught me off-guard and I was quite intimidated. I must have answered them correctly because in spite of my newfound anxiety about probability statistics, USU gave me the job. I joined the department as a research assistant professor in 2007.

Fairly soon after I started, I attended a routine faculty meeting. I was still new at these and back then I kept pretty quiet. In that meeting the faculty were having a conversation about the identity of the department, particularly about the use of the term “lifespan”. I don’t remember why we were discussing it, but I definitely remember Randy Jones saying, “Why do we even need gerontology anyway? Why not just call ourselves Child Development and get rid of it?” I fumed. And, for a few meetings and months after this comment, I was positively mad at him. As time went on I knew that he really wasn’t trying to slash 2/3 of the lifespan out of our department. It had been a hypothetical question, and he did want to keep gerontology included, but I still felt intimidated. Who WAS this guy?

As my office moved from the Gun Shed into the 214 complex in the Family Life Building, and moved again but this time next to Randy’s, I gradually got to know this guy with the crazy hair. He answered his phone with one syllable: “Jones”. He got to work crazy early and left in the afternoon. His emails were short, and his face-to-face conversations with current and potential graduate students were long and generous with advice and support. And as these things go, I realized that the gruff exterior that had intimidated me just a year or so earlier was just a small part of the endearing person that was Randy Jones.

Gradually my morning hello’s when unlocking my office door turned into sit downs- always in his office. While we talked (and sometimes vented) about work, we mostly talked about things outside of work. I didn’t have a fridge in my office so Randy let me use his coffee creamer (we agreed on important things like the use of real half and half, not the crappy fake stuff). We talked about our dogs a lot. We were both obsessed with the show Breaking Bad (the greatest television show ever, we decided) and we had to discuss each episode as we watched it. He gave me a Heisenberg bumper sticker for my ugly 1974 motorhome that looked exactly like the one Walter White (aka Heisenberg) drove in the show. We talked about growing apples and veggies. He shared his salsa recipe with me. When I had an issue about a revise-and-resubmit on a manuscript his advice was always solid. He suggested I use discriminant function analysis on a paper (and showed me how to do it as I had never used it before).
and it is my most widely cited research article. When I had babies and they started walking and talking Randy always invited them in for candy and a kind word. He claimed he wasn’t much of a kid-person, but when they drew him pictures he would put them on the wall. He shared with me stories of his wild days, and while my stories were outright boring in comparison, it felt at home to have a friend in the department that heard about me from the years before I did these mature, professory things.

It wasn’t all roses being Randy’s office neighbor. The Obama election and the months before and after were pretty disastrous. For me it was because Rush Limbaugh was constantly screaming from the radio in Randy’s office. Who WAS this guy? For Randy it was disastrous because Obama won. So I covered my ears with headphones to tune out Rush, and I generally avoided talking politics with Randy. In friendship one can agree to disagree. Even when they are wrong. J

Sometimes Randy could be moody, grumpy and pessimistic. There were days where he was certain the department, the field, America, and world, were going to hell, and he had data to support it. I can be moody and grumpy too. I was pregnant or a sleep-deprived mother of a newborn or toddler for the duration of my friendship with Randy. But I am an optimist, or at least a realist. So I tried to present counterpoints that suggested it was all going to be fine. We didn’t always see eye-to-eye, but he always listened. And his pessimism could be shifted if we just went back to talking about dogs. Or his Harley rides in the canyons with his wife. I don’t ride, but he would tell me the best hole-in-the-wall diners, the best place to see the foliage, a new route he took into Idaho. These were things that we always agreed on in the “life is good” department.

I missed Randy when he retired and I miss him more now. We didn’t talk much after his retirement except when I called him half a year ago to talk about my new puppy. He was happy for me and he seemed happy too.

Now, instead of talking with Randy we will have to talk about him, which is not nearly as good, but still great. Because no one talks about Randy Jones without at some point having a smile on their face and sharing a memorable, usually funny, always endearing “Randy story”.

I’ve got more but I’m good for now. Who’s next?