

April 24, 2009

Mentor of the Year Nomination

Faculty Member: Dr. David Denhardt

Submitted by: Tanya Gordonov (*Additional support from following undergraduates: Cassandra Louis, Megha Rajpal, Yao Li, Timothy J. Schiffer, Kiran Patel, Jay Panchal, and Monica Kadia*)

I started working with Dr. Denhardt during the summer of 2006 as part of the Aresty Summer Science program, and have been working in his lab ever since. During the past couple of summers Dr. Denhardt has mentored other Aresty Summer Science fellows, both of whom continue to work in the lab as well. Besides Aresty students, there are several other undergraduates working in the lab. We all believe that Dr. Denhardt deserves this award for the impact that he has had on our undergraduate studies. Dr. Denhardt's qualities that make him the best candidate for mentor of the year are his exceptional support of undergraduates' intellectual pursuits and independent projects, his availability, his willingness to help in the lab, and his understanding of undergraduates' priorities.

Throughout my time in the lab, Dr. Denhardt has been very supportive and available for advising. He is usually in lab most of the day and is easily contacted by email or phone. Not only is Dr. Denhardt an extremely experienced and knowledgeable mentor who is available to answer almost every question that undergraduates working in his lab may have, but he is also very supportive in undergraduates' own intellectual pursuits and independent projects. Many undergraduates have limited opportunities to undertake independent projects in their lab, whether it is because they are not considered capable or because graduate students are considered a much higher priority. Dr. Denhardt encourages his undergraduate lab members to come up with ideas and experiments they want to conduct. Anything that is interesting, relevant, and can teach the students new techniques is encouraged. Several of us in the lab are even in the process of writing manuscripts for papers on research we are conducting.

Dr. Denhardt helps facilitate contact with people who may be helpful outside our lab and does his best to make every resource available to us. When he thinks that there is a person in a nearby lab who is knowledgeable about a new technique that we are going to perform or a topic we have a question on, he will introduce us to the person and make sure we get the help we need. He will also demonstrate techniques to us himself, and give many helpful pointers.

Another quality that is worthy of a Mentor of the Year award is Dr. Denhardt's willingness to help in the lab. It is understandable that not all professors/mentors can be in the lab all the time, however, Dr. Denhardt goes out of his way to help out with routine laboratory procedures and equipment problems. Several times a day, he will go around the lab asking whether he can do anything for us. In those rare occasions when we take him up on the offer, he will finish some step of an assay, take a picture of a gel, or thaw out some cells for us if we have to be somewhere. The great majority of mentors aren't this helpful to their students. His dedication to helping students allows us to get experiments done more efficiently and overall lessens the stress of trying to finish an experiment before class, which can cause one to make errors.

Dr. Denhardt also always wants the students working in his lab to understand and learn about the techniques they are using. He doesn't just tell us to go read a paper or textbook chapter - but takes the time to teach us something about the subject. If we do want something to read, he is always willing to provide us with literature on a specific topic. He encourages us to ask questions and use the resources such as textbooks, journals, online databases, and people to expand our knowledge. But most importantly, again, he is very willing to answer any questions himself.

Dr. Denhardt understands very well that although the undergraduates in his lab come willingly to do research, they are still full-time students for whom academics come first. He is very understanding when students cannot come into lab because of an exam or an important assignment (he usually encourages the students to study and not come into lab unless they really want to). He wants us to be able to get good grades in class and doesn't work us when we need to be studying. The atmosphere that Dr. Denhardt creates in the lab is very welcoming – and he sometimes takes out his students to lunch. Dr. Denhardt also cares about his students personally – not just whether they are doing their experiments or not.

The above qualities make Dr. Denhardt deserving of recognition as a wonderful mentor who encourages undergraduate learning both inside and outside the lab. I have spoken with many other undergraduates who do research. When I tell them about Dr. Denhardt's availability, helpfulness, and encouragement I am always told how unique he is in that respect. We are all truly thankful for having such a wonderful mentor.