Faculty and Guests Pay Tribute to Legendary Scientist William Whelan at Retirement Celebration

Amjad Farooq, Ph.D., associate professor of biochemistry and molecular biology, keeps a photo of William “Bill” J. Whelan, Ph.D., D.Sc., FRS, in his classroom and tells his students about the legendary University of Miami scientist. “Bill made one of the most important discoveries in our field, and he is one of our own,” he said. “He is patient and persistent, with a passion for research and education.”
Dr. William Whelan with his wife, Alina.

Dr. Farooq was among the 60-plus faculty, students and friends of Dr. Whelan who attended a retirement celebration hosted by the Miller School’s Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology on November 14 at the Biltmore Hotel. With his wife Alina, Dr. Whelan recalled highlights of his long career in science and celebrated his 95th birthday. “Thank you for this wonderful honor,” said Dr. Whelan. “It’s a pleasure to be here with so many great people.”

Murray Deutscher, Ph.D., professor and former chair of
biochemistry and molecular biology, served as master of ceremonies as Sylvia Daunert, Ph.D., professor and Lucille P. Markey Chair of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, was unable to attend. “Bill is an outstanding scientist, faculty member and former chairman, and he is still active in our field,” said Dr. Deutscher. “We wish him the best in the future.”

Physician, entrepreneur and philanthropist Philip Frost and his wife Patricia attended the celebration for their longtime friend. “Thank you for all you have done for me personally, as well as your many contributions to the University of Miami and our community,” said Dr. Frost.

A remarkable discovery

A native of England, Dr. Whelan began his academic career at the University of Birmingham, the University of North Wales and the University of London. He is renowned in scientific circles for his discovery of glycogenin – the “missing link” in the molecular pathway that turns the body’s stored glucose into glycogen, the fuel for muscle cells. Dr. Whelan began studying glycogen synthesis in 1950, but it took him another three decades to overcome scientific skepticism and lost funding, to make his game-changing discovery.

In 2006, Dr. Whelan received the University of Miami’s Distinguished Faculty Scholar Award for lifetime achievement in research. His many other academic honors include being named a Fellow of the Royal Society of London, an honorary Member of the Royal College of Physicians of London, and a Fellow of the American Association of Academic Scientists. He also holds the honorary DSc degree of La Trobe University, Australia.
Along with his scientific work, Dr. Whelan was a leading educator who served as president of the International Union of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (IUBMB), and continues to serve as co-editor of the organization’s journal, *IUBMB Life*.

At the retirement celebration, Alexandra Newton, Ph.D., IUBMB president and professor of pharmacology at the University of California, San Diego, called Dr. Whelan a “visionary biochemist” who played a leading role in promoting biochemistry to the next generation of researchers.

“Bill founded our journal and created training fellowships for students around the world,” said Dr. Newton. She and her colleague, James Davie, Ph.D., IUBMB general secretary and professor of biochemistry and medical genetics at the University of Manitoba, presented Dr. Whelan with a birthday gift: an engraving of the glycogenin molecule on a Plexiglas cube.

**A long career at the medical school**

Dr. Whelan flew from the UK to Miami in 1967 to become the medical school’s second chair of biochemistry, a position he held until 1991. “Our department had three faculty members, two graduate students and a secretary,” he said at the Biltmore event. Realizing that Miami was “not on the map” for scientists, he soon launched the Miami Winter Symposium, which became an annual event that attracted Nobel Prize winners and other noted researchers from around the world.
Dean Leonidas G. Bachas, left, talks with Dr. William Whelan at the reception.

Frans Huijing, Ph.D., senior professor emeritus, met Dr. Whelan in 1963 at a joint meeting of the British and Dutch biochemistry societies. “I had been studying glycogen storage diseases in children,” he said. “He invited me to join his department, and we came here in May 1968. We’ve had many wonderful discussions in our offices and retreats in Bimini and Flamingo in the Everglades.”

Angelo Azzi, M.D., Ph.D., recalled meeting Dr. Whelan at the first Miami Winter Symposium in 1968. “I remember one of the speakers telling me, ‘If you don’t run any risks, you don’t go anywhere,’” said Dr. Azzi, who is co-editor of the IUBMB journal. “Throughout his life, Bill was a risk-taker, both personally and professionally, and as a result he has had a tremendous impact on many lives.”
Jarrard Goodwin, M.D., chief medical officer of Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, has been Dr. Whelan’s colleague for nearly 40 years. “I have a deep appreciation for his intellect and loyalty to our school,” he said. “Bill is an excellent scientific investigator and wonderful, thoughtful gentleman.”

Leonidas G. Bachas, Ph.D., dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, noted that Dr. Whelan has also contributed to the growth of UM’s biochemistry program. “It’s now one of the fastest growing majors in our college,” he said.

At the end of the evening, Dr. Whelan presented a slide show whose highlights included meetings with royalty and heads of state, including British Prime Minister Anthony Eden, Queen Elizabeth, and President Ronald Reagan. “I have had some wonderful opportunities to travel the world,” he said. “It’s been a very rewarding career.”