

Michel Talagrand

Joe Diestel is a prime example of a mathematician whose influence cannot be measured simply by the theorems he proved. He served as ambassador for Banach Spaces for a great many years. He wrote popular books, such as his famous ``Geometry of Banach Spaces'' lecture notes. These notes do not contain anything he proved, but they were very influential nonetheless. Joe was respected by the best. I remember Jean Bourgain telling me with admiration that Joe could not be fooled concerning the quality of mathematics.

I have fond memories of the first class Banach Spaces conference in Kent Joe organized in the summer of 1979. I arrived in Kent several weeks before the conference, and without my asking Joe managed to fund my stay in a royal way: he did care about people. Some people had the nice idea to have every participant sign a sheet of paper, in order to make a souvenir plaque for Joe. It did not quite work accordingly to plan. Only about 90% of the participant's signatures fit on that sheet. As the other 10% could hardly be ignored, Joe got two plaques, the second one mostly blank. I felt really sorry, he deserved better. Isn't it funny to remember that?

Fate helped one of the great achievements of Joe. It is in his office that I saw my future wife for the first time. She was a graduate student in a somewhat different field, but he had the genius idea to twist her arm so that she comes to my lecture and the dinner afterwards. She candidly said that the lecture did not thrill her. Nonetheless later she admitted that the good words he had said about me were the prime reason she was interested in the beginning. This was another good contribution of Joe to mathematics, as I certainly would have achieved much less if I had not been as happy as I was.

Joe had incredible memory. Many years later, while driving through Kent with my wife and son, we unexpectedly knocked at the door of his office. He instantly remembered my son's name, which he must not have heard for over 15 years. It was amazing. We had a nice talk. That was the last time I saw him. I am lucky to remember him in his prime.