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## Michael Brandt remembered for compassion, skill as electrical engineer and musician



Courtesy of Damian Allis

By **Michael Sessa** (</writers/michael-sessa/>) NEWS EDITOR

1 day ago

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When he was five years old, Michael Brandt was playing Mozart by ear. Brandt's sister, Ellie Shelburne, remembers how he would walk by the family piano while she was playing and point out the notes she had missed by name.

Brandt, who worked as an electrical engineer in Syracuse University's Department of Chemistry, was a certifiable genius, musically and academically — he had the IQ test scores to prove it. But Brandt's family, friends and colleagues remember his humility and kindness most of all, as well as the gentle approach he took to solving SU's most complex research and technical problems for decades.

Brandt, 58, of Skaneateles died on Oct. 30 after being diagnosed with renal cell carcinoma, a form of kidney cancer.

Sally Prasch, one of Brandt's closest friends, met him while she was working as a scientific glass blower at SU. Prasch recalls seeing Brandt, who was shy and quiet, walk past her door. For a while, all she knew Brandt by was his hair.

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Prasch introduced herself eventually, and the two became friends, routinely having lunch together and growing close. Brandt's knowledge of electronics and laboratory equipment, as well as his commitment to finding low-cost solutions to the university's research challenges, was unmatched, Prasch said.

"You don't think about this, but all the researchers on campus need support, and if they don't have that support, they can't do their research," she said.

Over the course of his career, Brandt likely saved SU millions of dollars in new equipment and repairs, Prasch said. He routinely found replacement parts for cheap, and if he couldn't, he would build them himself.

Mario Montesdeoca, the laboratory manager for civil and environmental engineering, called Brandt his "comrade of creating solutions."

"When you brought a problem to him, it was, for him, an opportunity to create a solution," Montesdeoca said. "Instead of spending thousands of dollars, he would go and look into it, and a \$2,000 expenditure would become 20 cents."

Shelburne was aware of Brandt's profound intellect early. Brandt is survived by her and his brother, Richard, as well as his parents, Ogden and Elisabeth.

"We're a pretty academic family, but Michael was by far the smartest of all of us," Shelburne said.

Brandt achieved perfect scores on nearly every exam he took in school, including the SAT. He briefly attended Massachusetts Institute of Technology before transferring to Vassar College, where he graduated magna cum laude in 1984. Brandt earned awards for most accomplished physics student in both 1983 and 1984.

Brandt was brilliant but unassuming, said Suzanne Baldwin, an earth science professor at SU. When Brandt would come to make repairs on equipment in Baldwin's noble gas mass spectrometry lab, he made sure to explain what had gone wrong, drawing diagrams and writing instructions for future maintenance.

In a field dominated by men, Brandt considered Baldwin an intellectual equal.

Brandt's basement office space was a flurry of open electronics and meticulously-maintained equipment, said Damian Allis, an assistant research professor in SU's Department of Chemistry.

"It was like a living museum," Allis said.

Allis would visit Brandt to talk about ongoing projects or to pet his cat, who frequently joined him in his office. The space, next to Prasch's glass-blowing studio, was a testament to Brandt's array of skills, filled with mechanical do-hickeys, plants and pinball machines.

Soon after meeting Brandt, Allis discovered that the two shared musical interests. Along with Sean Kelly, a budget administrator at SU, they formed a band initially called the Free Radicals, a nod to their chemistry backgrounds.



Brandt played in a variety of bands with friends and colleagues while at SU. **COURTESY OF SALLY PRASCH**

Brandt played bass, among other instruments, expertly. He had a knack for melodic and complex solos.

“You put a bass and a keyboard in front of him and he turned into Geddy Lee, without the vocals,” Allis said.

The trio regularly got together at Brandt’s off-the-grid home to share pizza and rehearse. Sometimes, Brandt would cook for them.

Allis remembers looking forward to Brandt’s wry humour and wit. Brandt, whose closest neighbor sold antiques, told Allis his home had been burglarized by an antiques thief who was part of a police sting operation to catch a drug kingpin.

In reality, the burglar ransacked the house but didn’t touch Brandt’s basses.

Anne Dovciak, a lab supervisor at SU, recalls that same understated sense of humor, in addition to Brandt’s kind approach at work and skills in the kitchen. Professors and staff in the chemistry department would ask Brandt to bring “those potatoes” to their holiday potlucks, and eventually, Brandt started using those exact words on the sign-up sheets.

Over 18 years, Allis and Brandt played in three bands together, performing at Syracuse



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Shelburne attended the shows, still impressed by the musical talent she had first witnessed from her brother when he was young. The two would go to concerts together, listening to music from bands such as Rush and Genesis, she said.

Brandt, who was the best man at Shelburne's wedding, was close with her and her kids. He spent weeks on vacation with Shelburne and her husband following their honeymoon, and he often visited on Christmas.

Each year, he'd send the kids the same exact Christmas greeting card, customizing each with notes and cartoon animals.

"He saw beauty in everything," Prasch said.

Nancy Totah, an associate chemistry professor at SU, said the department misses Brandt's helping hand and expertise.

"He was a steady, reliable presence in the department, and he did so many things for so many people, so the fact that he's not here is noticed," she said.

Shelburne knows Brandt's shoes will be hard to fill, but she hopes his compassion and willingness to help will be a guiding light for the people who got to know him.

"I just want everybody to take a little dose of him and be nice to each other because there couldn't have been a kinder person," she said.

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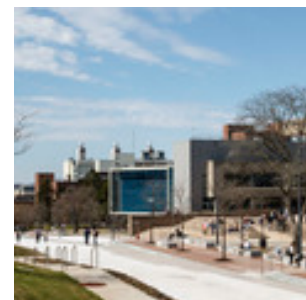


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By Louis Platt, Sydney Bergan | December 19, 2020

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This year, six Syracuse University alumni landed spots on varying 2021 Forbes 30 Under 30 lists. [Read more » \(/2020/12/6-su-alumni-landed-spots-2021-forbes-30-30-lists/\)](#)



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By Michael Sessa | December 18, 2020

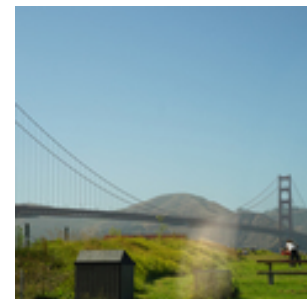
Brandt worked as an electrical engineer in Syracuse University's Department of Chemistry. [Read more » \(/2020/12/michael-brandt-remembered-compassion-skill-electrical-engineer-musician/\)](#)

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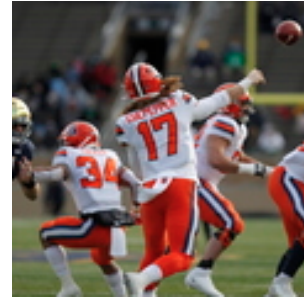


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