

## 19. The stuff of legend

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Essay

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### Essay

Merriam Webster defines *festschrift* as follows:

"a usually miscellaneous volume of writings from several hands for a celebration; especially: one of learned essays contributed by students, colleagues, and admirers to honor a scholar on a special anniversary."

(Etymology: German, from *fest* festival + *schrift* writings)

Thus, a *festschrift* is reserved for one who has the status of a master teacher—a living legend. Bernie Ackerman is the stuff of legend.

This is not merely the rambling speculation of a starry-eyed student of his (I was not one of his fellows, but I do consider myself to be one of his students and colleagues); it is an objective fact.

Bernie has all the signs, all the earmarks, all the substance that will make his name forever synonymous with methods for diagnosis of inflammatory diseases of the skin, melanoma, adnexal neoplasms, and learning dermatopathology through the lessons of history. His influence will, however, extend beyond these important contributions.

Why him? What are the reasons?

There are several but the following are among the most important:

1. Bernie recognized early in his career that the historical context of a disease is as important, if not more important, than the next new antibody discovered to aid in the diagnosis of it.
2. Bernie recognized the fact that consistent language must be employed at every step of the identification and classification of disease.
3. Bernie employed the formal use of algorithms to illustrate the process of diagnosis, vis-à-vis his books on inflammatory diseases of the skin.

4. Bernie never shirked from controversial topics, using the above methods to debunk the myths behind them, vis-à-vis, the dysplastic nevus. (For this service alone he deserves the status of a legend.)
5. Bernie required only the best illustrations for purposes of publication.
6. When Bernie perceived that he had erred on any topic, he attempted to set the record straight in public, in open forum.

I became conscious of Bernie and his writings in 1982, the first year of my residency in pathology at Missouri University. By then, his reputation was already renowned. His journal, *The American Journal of Dermatopathology*, was already in its fourth year of publication. He was in great demand as a speaker, and he seemed to be included in every important venue in dermatopathology throughout the world. He was only 46 then, but he had already set the stage for what would be a dizzying academic spectacle.

Virtually everywhere I turned, and on virtually every major topic in dermatopathology, Bernie had been there before, and he had written with authority on any subject he chose to pursue. His articles were always challenging to read, not only because they were written with a sense of certainty, but also because they were interesting and compelling. They were the kinds of articles that helped greatly to mold my philosophy of approach to a diagnosis.

When I met those he had trained formally, none were unaffected by him; in fact, to state it positively, they were all affected deeply. Some regarded him as saintly; a few had contempt for him; no one was ambivalent about him. This dichotomy of opinion intrigued me from early on, and I wanted to learn more about him. This, however, I found difficult precisely because of the strong views of him held by his students.

I finally met the man and learned about his character directly in late 2001, after I had reviewed his book, *Neoplasms with Follicular Differentiation*, for *The American Journal of Dermatopathology*. Bernie sent a letter to me, which I tucked neatly away into my review copy of his book ([Fig. 1](#)). It was an unexpected response to a review that was thoroughly critical and yet laudatory of his work. I learned that this was typical of Bernie; he has always welcomed *authentic* criticism. Soon afterward, he invited me to become the book review editor for this journal, which I accepted.

ACKERMAN ACADEMY OF DERMATOPATHOLOGY



October 23, 2001

Mark A. Hurt  
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Dear Mark,

I have just returned from Japan, and, perforce, this letter to you must be brief. I want to thank you, profusely, for your extraordinarily instructive review of our book about "Neoplasms with Follicular Differentiation"; I only wish that I had shown you the manuscript before it became bound as a book! In short, I cannot thank you enough for contributing to the education of

A. Bernard Ackerman, MD  
who looks forward to preparing responses to your thoughtful questions.

ABA/kew

Fig. 1 Letter from Bernie Ackerman to Mark Hurt, dated 23 Oct. 2001, in response to a review

***of Neoplasms in Follicular Differentiation***

Rarely have I encountered a mind like Bernie's, and much to my benefit. In my case, getting to know The Legend has been vastly more enjoyable than merely learning of him through his writings. He is opinionated, and he is knowledgeable about a wide variety of topics, not only in dermatopathology. It matters deeply to him whether dermatopathology will survive as an academic discipline and whether those engaged in its study will continue to nurture it as it should be nurtured. In short, his is the kind of mind I have long sought to find, whatever disagreements we have had on the topics we have discussed.

I don't believe I am alone in my search, however, as many of his other colleagues who will write lines for this *festschrift* surely have been looking for the same type of exalted mind. I am certain they will agree with me that, in Bernie, they have found it.

Bernie is unique; those of us who have been honored by his intellect, his kindness, and his relentless drive to "keep the process moving" will go forward in our careers and as human beings for the better because we have known him.

Thank you, Bernie, for giving so much.

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