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Family ties

Former student's family endows chair to honor friendship and future of Ambros research lab

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WORCESTER— A friendship born when a Dartmouth freshman took a \$4.75-an-hour job washing lab glassware for the summer has blossomed into a \$1.5 million gift to honor his mentor, a new star at University of Massachusetts Medical School.

Venture capitalists H. Scott Silverman and his father, Jeffrey L. Silverman, have endowed a chair to recognize Victor R. Ambros, a professor in molecular medicine whose most recent award is widely considered the American equivalent of the Nobel Prize. He will be the first Silverman Chair in Natural Sciences, pending approval by the UMass Board of Trustees at its meeting Thursday.

"It's an amazing thrill to have somebody whom you know well take such a step," Dr. Ambros, who has a Ph.D. in biology from MIT, said last week. "We can think of the Silvermans as our partners in our research every day because it really does make a difference. It enables us to do research we wouldn't have been able to do otherwise."

It was 1993 when Scott Silverman moved into part-time research in the Ambros lab after realizing his pre-med path was less interesting to him than the pursuit of science he saw that summer after his freshman year. By the next semester, he was working 15 hours a week in the lab, balanced with his studies and his time on the water polo team.

He was becoming a good friend of the Ambros family. Rosalind "Candy" Lee, manager of the lab, co-author on seminal papers, and Dr. Ambros' wife, recruited Scott Silverman to teach the couple's three children how to program their own Web site at a time the Internet was in its infancy.

"It was a genuine mentorship, a much more personal relationship than

just showing up for lecture hall,” Scott Silverman said. “I refer to Candy as my Chinese mother.”

Dr. Ambros was leading research into the role of microRNAs, short stretches of ribonucleic acid molecules that control genes. He ultimately supervised Scott Silverman’s honors thesis, which identified a transcription factor that affects how microRNAs regulate genes. Transcription factors are involved in how genetic information is passed — or transcribed — from DNA to messenger RNA.

A paper written by scientists in the lab on what was originally called “the Silverman factor” was published this year, proud co-author Scott Silverman noted.

After graduating from Dartmouth, Scott Silverman earned a doctorate in molecular genetics at the University of Oxford. He then embarked on a career investing in biotech companies at Atlas Ventures and Oxford Bioscience Partners. Last year he joined his father, a futures trader trained at MIT, in Agman Partners, an investment fund with offices in Chicago and Miami.

But the younger Silverman had contemplated honoring Dr. Ambros since his graduation.

“As soon as I left I thought it would be a really cool thing to do,” he said. “At that point it was a dream (because) the resources were not available. I thought all along I could kill two birds with one stone: make a significant contribution to my alma mater and also formally tie the families together with a special gift.”

Dr. Ambros left Dartmouth to come to UMass in January, recruited by RNA interference co-discoverer and Nobel laureate Craig C. Mello to join a critical mass of RNA researchers at the state’s medical school. Since then Dr. Ambros has shared the 2008 Lasker Award for Basic Medical Research, among other prestigious prizes.

“We fully understand why Victor and Candy fell in love with UMass. It’s a special place trying to do something very special,” Scott Silverman said. “As investors we don’t think good is good enough. We actually think great is what is required to be transformative.”

The Silvermans were not alone in wanting to endow a chair for Dr. Ambros. His success was attracting donor attention, generating competition among two or three groups, Scott Silverman said.

He would do only one thing differently, if he could.

“If we could have given the chair to two people at one time, Candy would have also had the title,” he said.

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