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Physics professor Chris Henley dies at 59

By

Anne Ju

Henley

Christopher L. Henley, professor of physics in the College of Arts and Sciences, died June 29 after an illness. He was 59 years old.

Henley joined the Cornell faculty in 1989 as an assistant professor of physics, was promoted to associate professor in 1993, and became a full professor in 2001. Before that, he was an assistant professor at Boston University and also worked at AT&T Bell Laboratories.

At Cornell, Henley's research was in the theory of frustrated magnetism, both classical and quantum; interacting electron systems; quasicrystals; and biological physics.

In interacting electron systems, Henley's research group worked on the border of analytic theory and computation. They studied the ground states of a spinless fermion lattice model with supersymmetry. They also worked on phenomenology of scanning tunneling microscopy measurements in high-temperature superconductors.

In biological physics, Henley led projects in pattern formation and mechanics, specifically a large project about the physical bases of left/right symmetry breaking in various animals including snails; in plants; or in assemblies of single cells. He also was fascinated by the exterior shell geometry of viruses and worked to model the mechanics of plant roots.

Paul McEuen, the John A. Newman Professor of Physical Science, called Henley a “brilliant scientist.”

“He was interested in almost anything, unafraid of applying his careful and precise approach to wild and wooly problems in fields ranging from quantum physics to biology,” McEuen said.

“He was a productive colleague, dedicated mentor and deeply committed to intellectual and academic pursuits,” said Jeevak Parpia, professor of physics. “He will be missed by all of us.”

Last September, Henley's colleagues and friends came together to celebrate his 59th birthday and his contributions to the field of theoretical solid-state physics. The symposium included an international panel of speakers.

Henley was born Sept. 24, 1955, in Washington, D.C., to Norman F. and Nancy Henley. He received a bachelor's degree in physics and mathematics from the California Institute of Technology in 1977 and his doctorate in physics from Harvard University in 1983. He was a fellow of the American Physical Society and was the recipient of many professional honors, including an Alfred P. Sloan Research Fellowship and a Presidential Young Investigator Award.

When young, according to his mother, he had a strong interest in maps and was a precocious navigator for his family's trips. In adulthood, Henley ran, swam or bicycled every day, and enjoyed hiking, reading, contra dancing, classical music and Scrabble, among other things.

Henley was given a natural burial in Chesterfield, Massachusetts. He is survived by his mother, son, aunt and cousins.