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## RONALD P. KIENE: Major League Pitching Prospect, Avid Sports Fisherman, and Biogeochemist Who Probed the Mysteries of the Oceanic Organosulfur Cycle

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## RONALD P. KIENE

### Major League Pitching Prospect, Avid Sports Fisherman, and Biogeochemist Who Probed the Mysteries of the Oceanic Organosulfur Cycle

Ronald S. Oremland, Gary King, Pieter Visscher, and Douglas G. Capone

The marine and environmental microbiology science communities lost one of its star players, Ron Kiene, at the untimely age of 59. Ron passed away from complications associated with battling a squamous cell carcinoma, first diagnosed in 2016. The cancer had metastasized, but he only learned of it after returning from a research cruise in 2018. He underwent a debilitating course of further surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy treatments in late 2018 and early 2019, all while still teaching his course load. Ron was always a powerful, heads-on fighter, never one to quit, but the cumulative treatments proved too harsh even for him to bear. He succumbed to heart failure during the night of 19 January 2019.

Ron was born on 06 July 1959 in the city of New York, the borough of Brooklyn, the neighborhood of Bay Ridge. He arrived a year after the beloved Dodgers departed for LA, the same year in which construction of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge began, which when completed in 1964 bisected Bay Ridge. To those who grew up in those southern reaches of Brooklyn by the sea like Bay Ridge or Coney Island, two things were “in the blood” so to speak: baseball and fishing. The loss of the Dodgers (*dem Bums*) was particularly galling to the denizens of Bay Ridge because many of the players, in those years before free agency and outrageous salaries, dwelt among the *hoi polloi*. The arrival of the Mets in 1962 only rubbed salt into the open wound, as until 1969 they were horrible, and moreover the Mets settled into Shea Stadium in Queens rather than Brooklyn. Something had to be done to rectify the borough’s lost glory, perhaps someday by one of Bay Ridge’s native sons?

The southern reaches of Brooklyn border the Atlantic Ocean via the New York Bight and its

estuarine extensions, like Jamaica Bay and the lower Hudson River. While the rest of the city swelters in summer, these regions are cooled by onshore sea breezes. The salt air that wafts ashore beckons young boys to the littoral for adventures in the exploration of tidal life, swimming in summer, and of course watching the fishermen make their casts. As one grew older, shoreline fishing become a pastime, and Ron started indulging this nascent passion along stretches of Shore (*Belt Parkway*) Boulevard than circumscribed his neighborhood. When older and more adventurous, there were party boats to be had from nearby Sheepshead Bay that would venture further out to sea for catching giant fluke, pogies, mackerel, cod, stripers, and bluefish. This was the milieu (baseball and fishing) into which Ron grew up and was well ensconced in by the time he entered public high school.

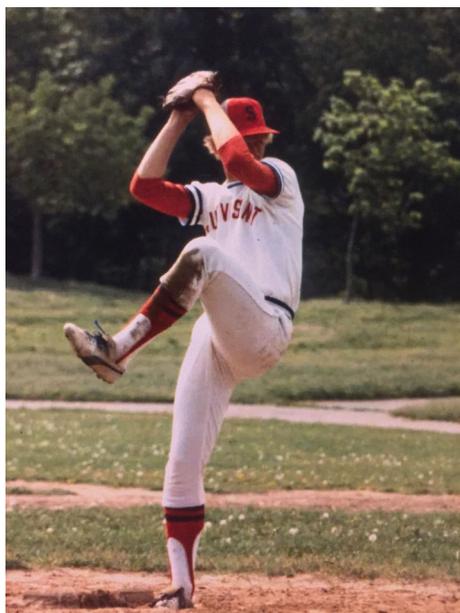
And it was not just any city high school: it was Stuyvesant High in lower Manhattan, a free prep school for the city’s gifted, competitive kids. You had to be smart just to get in, and very smart to get out 4 yr later with your diploma in hand. Mixed in with his academics, came spring Ron played baseball for “Stuy” and became their starting pitcher. So much so that the Dodgers drafted him after graduation, and a future in Los Angeles beckoned, but he balked. Maybe it had something to do with an inkling of shoulder issues arising as a harbinger of a short career in the majors, or maybe it had something to do with feeling a traitor to Brooklyn and deserting the memory of “dem Bums” for the frivolities of the west coast’s LA-LA land, but he chose a cerebral path instead. He went to college at St. John’s University in Queens, where he continued to pitch on a baseball scholarship, and the team heading twice to the nationwide College World Series over the 4 yr he matriculated (and pitched). To get into the CWS is a big deal, and to give you an idea of what the quality of his team was like, two other pitchers on St. John’s at the time were Frank Viola and John Franco, both of whom headed to the major leagues. Ron graduated with a B.S. in biology in 1981, but by then his shoulder truly ached and he gave up the idea of major league baseball. After all, he could always fall back on his second passion: fishing!

Well, sort of.....Ron’s initial interest was zoological, dealing with marine sediment invertebrate in-fauna like worms and clams (aka: live bait), but this changed when he arrived at SUNY Stony Brook’s Marine Science Research Center (MSRC) and tied in with his mentor, Doug

Capone. Doug steered him toward sediment microbiology, focusing on methanogenesis and sulfate reduction. Ron’s passion and enthusiasm for science was unleashed and unbridled during graduate school. During his graduate tenure at MSRC, Ron insisted (against his advisor’s advice) to obtain his M.S. degree along the way. His rationale was to show his parents and grandparents that he was making progress. An early indication of Ron’s potential was the awarding of a regular NSF grant from the Ocean Sciences/Biological Oceanography research section to fund his Ph.D. research. Three of the present writers (RO, GK, and DC) remember fondly gathering on a very blizzardy February day in 1985 for Ron’s qualifying exam at Stony Brook. The event was coincident with the arrival of Doug’s second daughter, adding to the chaos of the weather for Ron’s first major academic hurdle (which he sailed over). He also found time to mentor his mentors, for example, infecting Doug with his love of the music of Mark Knopfler and Dire Straits.

Bill Dennison at UMCES/Horn Point, then a Postdoctoral Fellow at Stony Brook, remembers Ron’s pitching prowess: “I very much enjoyed playing catch with Ron behind the Discovery building at MSRC. He could throw a curve ball that I found difficult to catch and a fastball (with his left arm) that I could catch, but it left my hand stinging. Ron would have me hold a glove in front of me with two hands as a target and invariably he would hit the target. He was impressive. I also recall introducing Ron to a chemist friend from MIT when Ron was still a graduate student and he said that his demeanor completely changed when the subject switched from chemistry to baseball. Ron was tentative with him about chemistry, but his confidence noticeably increased when talking about baseball. I loved picking Ron’s brain when I would see him at meetings, as he was such a good synthesizer and explainer. He could distill hotly debated topics into understandable bits.”

A brief sojourn at Ron Oremland’s lab in California got him interested in dimethyl sulfide (DMS) as a precursor substrate for methanogenesis, and from thence he never looked back. He finished his Ph.D. in 1986, and while working in Capone’s lab, met one of Doug’s master’s students (Julie McDaniel) whom he wed in 1987. From the MSRC they headed south to Rosenstiel School of Marine & Atmospheric Sciences (RSMAS) of the University of Miami, where he worked with Barrie F. Taylor (mentor to Oremland and Capone) also tying in while there with Pieter Visscher (who had first worked with Ron at MSRC), another Taylor postdoc. As a



**FIG. 1.** Ron pitching during his senior year at Stuyvesant High School in 1977.

bona fide member of the “Miami Mafia” Ron delved into microbial metabolism of the DMS precursor, dimethyl-sulfoniopropionate (DMSP).

From there, a faculty position opened up at the University of Georgia’s Marine Institute. In February of 1988, Ron and Julie moved to the offshore wilderness of Sapelo Island and lived in the shadow of the R.J. Reynold estate. Ron continued work on *Spartina* but expanded his research to include volatile sulfur in estuarine and coastal waters and even microbial mats. Days in Sapelo were either spent in the lab or when the moon and tide were favorable, on a road bike loaded with fishing rods, cast nets and buckets, its narrow tires digging into the beach under the heavy load. With shrimp or fresh caught fish on the table, dolphins in the surf, and sea turtles laying eggs on the beach, Sapelo offered an opposite world of Brooklyn



**FIG. 2.** Ron driving a zodiac in Antarctica during a 2006 research at Palmer Station.

and Miami for Ron and Julie. This also meant that hurricanes found the island in their path. A nervous father-to-be, Ron had to evacuate Julie during category five storm Hugo, just days before Andrew Devon was born on 01 October 1989. Exciting times persisted, especially when Ron attempted to relocate a big reptile from his property to keep young Andrew out of harm’s way, finding out first hand that even a small gator tail can whip ferociously.

A few years later, in December 1992, the Kienes, moved to Mobile, AL, where Ron took a faculty position at the University of South Alabama (USA) and its Dauphin Island Sea Lab (DISL) where his lab was located. A little over a year later, Julie and Ron’s second son Dylan was born; both Andrew (Physics professor at Nova Southeastern) and Dylan (Ph.D. candidate in Fisheries) followed in Ron’s science footsteps, but Dylan is the one who got Ron’s baseball and fishing genes.

During Ron’s 26-yr career at U.S.A. and DISL, he touched many. Upon his arrival, Ron immediately made an impact on the research culture at the lab, which until that point was mainly focused on marine ecology and fisheries. In his first graduate Chemical Oceanography class, he introduced the course as the “ecology of elements in the ocean.” This is indeed how Ron looked at the world as a connected Earth system from macro to microscales. He hooked many of us on this way of thinking, and his generosity with his knowledge and skills allowed us to follow in his footsteps.

Ron was a dedicated mentor to the younger faculty who began their careers at DISL and who looked up to Ron for advice in navigating the tenure process and establishing their labs. Ron’s effectiveness as a mentor was born out of his child-like curiosity about the natural world. This was infectious for both students and colleagues. Brief exchanges of niceties at the coffee pot often turned into long and in depth dissections of some topic that he had been mulling over or of some problem of your own that piqued his interest. These conversations would often lead to proposals or pilot studies to flesh out ideas and methods. As important were the conversations about his boys’ recent successes or the latest political outrage, as we loved Ron’s passion for making the world a better place and how proud he was of his family.

Ron was clearly the most accomplished member of the DISL faculty, and his outstanding research brought students and postdocs

from all over the world to work in his lab and learn from him.

Gelling discussions with Maureen Keller and Pieter Visscher, Ron started organizing the First International Symposium on DMSP and Related Onium Compounds shortly after arriving in Alabama. In early June of 1995, 64 scientists from 12 countries gathered for a week in Mobile to discuss the present and future of odorous sulfur compounds. A year later, Ron et al. published a 400-page book on DMSP, with contributions of most of the prominent organosulfur researchers. The breadth of topics covered in this 36-chapter publication is further evidence for Ron’s impact on the field and interest in virtually all aspects of sulfur biochemistry and microbiology. A recent article details the impact Ron work had on the organosulfur biogeochemical research community (Boden 2019).

Ron won the most important awards at U.S.A. for his scholarship and was widely recognized for his many successes and accomplishments at his home institutions, as well as nationally and internationally. Ron taught Chemical Oceanography to many students who went on to their own distinguished careers, and it is fair to say that Ron was a success in everything he attempted during his long and productive career at U.S.A. and DISL. In 2015, Ron was made a Fellow of the Association for the Sciences of Limnology and Oceanography.

Ron’s prowess on the baseball diamond is well known. He anchored the U.S.A./DISL intramural softball team that competed in the league for many seasons. Ron’s abilities were far above everyone else but he cheerfully played with his amateur teammates. Ironically, at the very first game that Ron participated in, not knowing that he was such a talented athlete and mainly going by his laid-back appearance as a young chemical oceanographer, Ron was positioned in right field thinking that was the place where he would do the least harm. He turned in a stellar game in the field and at the plate and thereafter Ron patrolled the outfield at most games because his ability to chase down balls and quickly throw them back to the infield was beyond compare. In one memorable game, a particularly well-hit ball was flagged down by Ron near the outfield fence and he quickly turned and threw the ball on a straight line all the way from the fence to home plate. Unfortunately, our catcher was inexperienced and not looking for the missile Ron had sent his way. Just as he turned in Ron’s direction, the ball struck him in the chest with a sickening thump. The catcher slowly fell over



**FIG. 3.** Ron and family in August 2018 on the river trail at Morgan's Landing on the Kenai Peninsula.

backward and lay still. Everyone on the field rushed to him, thinking he might be unconscious or even worse. He was conscious, but badly shaken and he had the clear imprint of a softball on his chest in what was becoming a huge bruise. We helped him off the field and sat him down to rest. But he never returned to play another game after that encounter with Ron's throwing arm.

Because he was so passionate about science, Ron loathed antiscientific politics and policies especially regarding global warming and associated changes. He was an ardent supporter of activism to support and bolster the scientific enterprise. He was active in the March for Science and regularly voiced his concerns and opinions as a scientist in op-ed pieces for the local Mobile, AL newspaper. He could be a very tough critic of both ideas and people, but his criticism was tempered with thoughtful and constructive feedback.

As a friend and colleague, he was one of a kind and irreplaceable. We shall miss the days of research, play, fishing, laughing about the ones that got away, and planning the next adventure.

Much has been said and written about Ron's scientific accomplishments, his athletic prowess, and his passion for fishing. During his all too short lifetime, he packed enough success in each of these realms to fill the lives of numerous others.

Yet even though he will long be remembered for his discoveries, his baseball championships, and the big ones that did not get away, it is the successes in his personal life that arguably mattered the most and will be remembered the longest.

What always stood out about Ron in all of his endeavors were his modesty, humility, patience, and compassion. Those who worked with him experienced those traits often. They were an ideal complement to his drive, his focus, his competitiveness, and his desire for perfection. In all that he did, Ron set the bars for success high, and he worked very hard to clear them, even though he made it seem effortless.

Yet he worked equally hard to help others clear their own bars. Remarkably, he did so with a generous and selfless spirit, not expecting a quid pro quo for his efforts, but understanding that contributing to the successes of others meant building a bigger and better team for all. Thus, as much as his colleagues and students applauded his scientific acumen, they paid even greater tribute to his humanity. Perhaps it is as fitting to think of him as the highly regarded Coach Ron as it is to think of him as the much admired Professor Kiene.

Outside of the walls of academe, Ron was also a coach, both literally and figuratively, again with much success. But he was a listener and learner as

well, who built strong, nurturing, and lasting relationships with his beloved wife, Julie, and his two sons, Andrew and Dylan, of whom he was "button bustin'" proud, and bragged often. Julie and the "boys" carry on now with plans to create a summer home in Alaska, the focus of Ron's retirement dreams. Yet they are not merely following in Ron's footsteps or trying to imitate him. Ron's gift was providing both examples of good life choices and the space in which to make them or not. Ron lives on then through his family and the many he influenced, who seek to create good lives in their own way for themselves and others, with his memory as a firm foundation. He would be very pleased.

A Research Scholarship is being established in Ron's name at the University of South Alabama memory (<https://giving.southalabama.edu/kiene>, active August 2019). All donations will be matched 1:1 from the Moulton-Mitchell Fund at the University of South Alabama.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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