

In memoriam: Tributes to Brian A. Iwata, Ph.D., from students and colleagues

Being mentored by Brian has been a privilege, an honor, and a welcomed challenge. He knew how to fill your plate, figuratively and literally, just slightly past what you thought you could handle and then allowed you to feel a moment of satisfaction as you were about to clear the plate before tossing something new onto it. From the first lesson ("Do something. I can't shape your behavior if you don't respond") to the last ("Keep pressing levers; you don't know when the next pellet is going to drop"), he emphasized the importance of being humble but not acquiescent, confident but never arrogant, sensitive to punishment but not scared of it, and pragmatic but not too rigid. I also learned some useful life skills, such as how to fly without checking a bag (choose one color scheme for the trip—black or brown—and build all of your outfits around it) and how to use a laser pointer (turn it on, stabilize offscreen, move slowly in one direction, turn it off, repeat). But, of all the lessons he taught, there was none more impactful for me than balance—balance in both the behaviors we engage in and the reinforcers we seek. Brian mentored us as whole people, and he was just as excited to celebrate a monumental event in our personal lives as he was to share our joy after successes in our professional lives. The generality of his lessons means that his mentorship will live on much longer than date past which we can no longer call him for advice. And that might be the greatest gift he ever gave. —

Sarah Mead Jasperse

Brian was a teacher, mentor, role model, advocate, friend, and much more to his many students. He took us under his wing and believed in some of us even when we didn't believe in ourselves. And many of us achieved goals we

never would have dreamed were possible. He was always there for his students, whether it was an academic issue, a sick child, a broken down car, or virtually any other problem—and this support continued long after his students graduated and began their own careers. Brian was one of the most prolific researchers in the field of Applied Behavior Analysis. He not only published frequently, sharing selflessly with his students, but published some of the most influential work in the history of the field. His work has spawned thousands of follow-up studies, which continue to expand the knowledge base for other researchers and clinicians. In the 45 years he mentored doctoral students, his graduates have gone on to also do ground-breaking research, and mentor their own graduates. His influence will continue to grow not only long after he is gone, but long after his graduate students and their graduate students are gone. His influence, directly and indirectly, on the science of understanding human behavior can never be truly measured.—**Terry Page**

Brian taught us all a lot —how to be scientists, critical thinkers, strong communicators, and tough and resilient people. He taught us to aim high, but to set reasonable goals: goals that would require you to stretch, but were within reach. Above all else, he was an amazing teacher. I remember his undergraduate class (3764) where the pieces fell into place for me and I knew that I wanted to be a behavior analyst. Because of him. And look at his legacy! Not just the hundreds of publications, but the amazing number of highly influential students he mentored. He truly made an enormous impact on the science and practice of behavior analysis,

and so many people benefit from his work. He will be sorely missed.—**Jess (Thomason) Sassi**

When I accepted a spot in the undergraduate Psychology major at the University of Florida, I had no idea I would be sitting in an Intro Applied Behavior Analysis class with one of the greatest applied behavior analysts of all time. I also had no idea that same class would set me on a path toward the most rewarding career in mentorship, clinical work, and research I could have ever imagined for myself. I have always felt that at the foundation of his excellence, Brian is a masterful teacher. His lessons extend well past the walls of classrooms and pages of journals and into an overwhelming legacy of students whose skills he has sharpened with unmatched determination. How lucky I was to be in the care of his craft for nearly 8 years! I recall a moment, shortly after entering my first faculty position, that I was newly struck by the immense growth I had under his mentorship. I forget if the moment was a culmination of a few young grad students making similar mistakes to those I had made, or another faculty commenting on how well I was doing in the new role. But in that moment, lots of Brian's characteristics that I previously misunderstood became super clear, and the only thing I could think to do to thank him (and apologize for the times I was difficult) was to send him the largest edible arrangement possible for purchase on the website. I remember him calling me and laughing at my gesture, saying something like "You didn't have to do this Tara; I'm not sure how Peg and I will eat all of this!" I laugh at the memory now, not just because it was a ridiculous way to show gratitude but also because it may have been, subconsciously, a product of his modeling gratitude through edible reinforcers. His love of top-tier restaurants and adventures in each new conference city is one of the many traditions I strive to emulate with my own students. It is hard to imagine a world without Brian, but fortunately, we do not have to. He will be here in so many forms forever. Thank you for everything, Brian. You are simply amazing. —**Tara Fahmie**

Brian took a chance on me, and for that I will always be grateful. I was the student who applied without having first gone through the "normal" channels (resulting in my application being described as a "surprise" to him), the student who was accepted into Brian's lab the year that he said he was not going to accept any new students, the student who struggled horribly to make it through a psychobiology class that first semester and worried that Brian was going to say that he'd made a mistake and that I should go. He took many chances on me over the years, and when I wrote to him a couple of years ago to thank him for all that he'd invested in me, his response was, "You were a terrific investment!" Brian taught me to be tough but not unyielding, to stand my ground but to also be receptive to feedback, to ask questions and put my behavior out there to be shaped, and to keep trying even when it seemed impossible. He taught me about time management, the importance of prioritizing, and that "failing" wasn't the worst possible outcome. My years in the lab with Brian were filled with some of my hardest moments to date, but also with some of the best. We were a team and we were expected to behave as such, and through that he taught us the importance of working together. I treasure so many of the friendships that I made during my time in the lab and after, and I would not have those connections were it not for Brian. Brian made his students better researchers, clinicians, presenters, teachers, and leaders, but he also made us better people. I thank him for investing in all of us and for all of the time, energy, and resources that he provided to move us toward being the best that we could be. I will always carry the label "Iwat" with immense pride. Much love always, Brian.—**Amanda Rone**

Brian saw unique qualities in me that I could not yet see in myself. He created a rich learning environment that taught me to be curious, to work hard, to never be afraid to share my insights (as long as they were supported by the data), and to believe that I could achieve great things. I am

forever grateful to have learned these lessons from Brian and to have been able to apply them in my mentorship of BCBAs.—**April Worsdell**

When I started graduate school in 1992 under Brian's mentorship, little did I know his mentorship would extend beyond graduation and blossom into a friendship. He was fiercely loyal and expected excellence. He modeled excellence by mentoring us in our academic endeavors but also in everyday life issues, using his own as a model. In my view, his excellence as a teacher, researcher, and clinician over the past 5 decades is exceeded only by his compassion and humanity. I was fortunate to be an active part of his mentorship. His dexterity in teaching adaptability and allowing me to adapt my own unique skillset in pursuing my professional and personal goals is what I cherish the most about his mentorship, along with his compassion and love for all of his students. His mentorship has produced 4 Chief Editors of *JABA*, and leaders in academic positions in university behavior analytic departments throughout the nation, but that adaptability in his mentorship has also more recently resulted notably in: (a) the current President of the BACB; and (b) the newly appointed CEO of the New England Center for Children; thus, portraying his depth and scope of influence he has had on his former graduate students in extending excellence into the applied sector. Finally on a personal story note, I must have played over 200 tennis matches with Brian from 1992-1997. Contrary to what some might believe, I did not let him win. He was consistently the better player. He earned every one of those wins, 195-5! Along the way, he imparted tips about stroke mechanics and strategies (no surprise) but levied with compassion and praise (for the 5 times I won). And in the end, having fun can be a goal. In my own mentorship with BCBAs and RBTs, I try to impart the same excellence as Brian has taught me. It's an extremely high bar, but the journey to reach it is both meaningful and rewarding. Brian, I will miss you!—**Han-Leong Goh**

I was an electrician before my career in behavior analysis. In fact, I worked as an electrician through most of my undergraduate program. Never could I have imagined at that time that I would have the chance to study under such a prominent academic/researcher. Despite my questionable undergraduate performance, Brian gave me a chance. He kept me on track through his disciplined approach as a mentor—I needed that. Through his mentorship and the experiences in his lab, I graduated a skilled and confident professional—a Ph.D.!!! There isn't a day that goes by that I don't reflect on the opportunity he gave me. I know the best way to honor him is to through my own mentorship of others pursuing careers in behavior analysis.—**Dave Wilson**

I came to UF as an accounting major and readily realized it was not my path. I was extremely lucky to have landed at UF where I met Brian and he took me under his wing. Brian was someone who I struggle to find words to describe. Brian was clearly a stellar teacher, mentor, and researcher. I was also deeply fortunate to end up sharing with him some good times and some struggles, and ultimately considering him a friend. He is teaching us all through his entire lifetime and beyond about resilience, love, bravery, dedication, service, science, and the value of time and attention. I know as much as I know anything that his light and his life will shine on in those he poured himself into. Forever grateful.—**Juliet Connors Blevins**

Brian was our teacher, mentor, friend, and family. He took a chance on many of us, seeing something in us that we didn't quite yet see in ourselves. He had a method for his process of training and mentoring students, which many of us did not fully understand until we left the safety of his direct support and supervision. He set up opportunities for us that laid the foundation for our future success—he prepared us well. He taught us to put our behavior out there to be shaped, to share our ideas (but to always have a

justification for them—back it up with citations if you can), and to not be afraid to try new things. He taught us to be sensitive to contingencies and that failure was a learning opportunity. He was a brilliant teacher who shaped our scientific writing, clinical and research skills, organizational skills, problem-solving skills, and professional skills. When you had a new research or clinical idea, Brian was always open to giving it a go; however, after that first meeting with him to pitch it (using visuals if possible—“just draw it out for me”), you walked out of the room with a better product. He was present, generous with his time, and invested in our success. But beyond his brilliance as an academic mentor, he was a friend and our family. He was always up for a good story or laugh (usually at our expense 😊). He was generous in treating us to delicious meals, cultural experiences, and outdoor adventures in the cities we visited for conferences. He was genuinely interested in us as people, celebrated our successes, and provided unwavering support during difficult times in our lives. He instilled in us the importance of being a lifelong mentor to our own students and supervisees. Over the years, many of us have continued to turn to Brian for advice, which was usually spot on. As we reflect on what this giant scholar, mentor, and friend has meant to us, we know his impact has been immense and he will always be with us. When faced with professional or personal obstacles, we will continue to ask, “What would Brian do?”—**Claudia Dozier**

I will always be immensely grateful for having had the opportunity to be one of Brian Iwata’s graduate students. When I first met Brian, I was a floundering undergraduate, unsure of what I wanted to do in this vast field referred to as psychology. Taking Brian’s SIB lab course as an undergrad was a transformative experience, as I found myself instantly drawn to his passion for the field, his inspirational teaching style, and his high-quality research. I could see that he was making an impactful contribution in both Behavior Analysis as a whole and in each of his graduate

student’s lives. One of Brian’s characteristics that I felt most drawn to was his ability to allow his students to have independence in formulating and conducting their own research. It was this collaborative style that I found very rewarding and try to emulate with the students who I mentor today. Brian was an unwavering source of support, inspiration, and encouragement during my time at grad school and beyond. He took me under his wing and showed me all that the science and philosophy of Behavior Analysis had to offer. After graduate school, he continued to serve as a dear friend and colleague. Our field has lost a legend, and many have lost an endearing friend. “B,” as I fondly referred to him, is irreplaceable, and I will miss him greatly.—**Eileen Roscoe**

Brian had this almost supernatural ability to get undergraduates excited about applied behavior analysis, teaching them along the way to think critically, speak clearly, and write well. I was exceedingly fortunate to take three courses with Brian during my time at UF. His impact on me professionally and personally has been immense. Thank you, Brian, for all you have done for me, for your students, and for the field. We are all the better because of you and your legacy.—**Brian Greer**

Despite all of his awards, publications, and leadership positions, he considered the success of his many students to be his greatest accomplishment. I will be forever grateful to Brian for his mentorship, guidance, and friendship.—**SungWoo Kahng**

Brian Iwata is highly prolific as a second author. He prioritized mentorship and led by example, creating the next generation of second authors. Thank you, Brian.—**Rachel Thompson**

To justly process and analyze his influence and impact would be impossible...the degrees of influence are massive. His influence on one degree, my life, will never be forgotten and something I will always be thankful for. He saw

something in a first-generation college student and took on the challenges of a dyslexic student when others in his position would have swiped left. From the first research protocol that looked like it had been dipped in a can of red paint when he gave it back to me to helping me grapple with how I should write a paragraph in my book, he supported and taught. He would take me around the world and expose me to things I never could have dreamed of. I remember how proud I felt about myself when I was able to be the catalyst for him and I to share the stage in Taiwan. He taught me many things, how to be a behavior analyst, research, writer, consumer of scientific evidence, but most of all how to be a mentor! His mentorship did not end on the day you graduated, in fact, his mentorship was ever present even on the last day I saw him, and he held and kissed my hand and told me that he loved me. I hope that I have been able to emulate and cultivate his mentorship with my own students. I have been lucky enough to see his direct influence on the assessment and treatment of severe behavior as well. With my first client I was able to take the treatment plan Brian wrote and in 6 months had cogently impacted his life and he no longer engaged in SIB, no longer wore a hockey helmet and boxing gloves, and was engaging in his class with other students and his teacher. Later I would take what he taught me and change the trajectory of many lives, some of whom who would tell me that I was the first person to ever help their child. Now my students and colleagues I consult with are changing lives daily. The spread of Brian's impact on the assessment and treatment on severe behavior is never ending, the degrees of influence unmeasurable.—**Michele Wallace**

Brian gave more of himself than he ever would have asked of someone else. Generous, honest, transparent, goal-oriented, precise, multifaceted, and the biggest cheerleader one could ever hope to encounter. Words cannot relay or capture the impact that Brian has had on my life, and I struggle as I write this to summarize all that he and his mentorship meant to me. Others have captured

it so eloquently—once Brian decided to mentor you and take you on as a student, it was a life-long commitment. I recall reading his bio prior to applying to his Ph.D. program in 2004 and distinctly recall reading that he was "generous with his time" with his students. That phrase captures so much more than one ever could have attempted to understand. "Generous" — what an understatement. He had such a knack for knowing what his students needed, how to shape their behavior, motivate them, and improve their repertoires — yet he had a way of believing in us more than we may have believed in ourselves. Having had the opportunity to be mentored by Brian is one of the greatest accomplishments of my life, and I am humbled and grateful and will continue to learn from that opportunity in years to come. His lessons reached far beyond those of academia — he showed us various parts of the world and cultures through travel (I have traveled more with Brian than I have anyone else), he shared delicious meals, his love of art, fun excursions to museums and the theater, his love of physical fitness, and family. Family. We became his family and vice versa. Brian was my mentor, my friend, and my extended family. He brought so many together, and this world is most definitely better off because of the lasting impact Brian has made — both personally and through the lives of his students and loved ones. I will forever miss him, yet know that his lessons will live on.—**Jen Hammond**

Brian taught us by modeling how to approach science, research, mentorship, teaching, dissemination, and the pursuit of excellence. His attention to detail and emphasis on precision was legendary, from reminding us to reserve "since" and "while" for time-based relations, to building a makeshift podium from borrowed cardboard boxes and tablecloths the night before a conference presentation so that I would be able to present confidently in a research symposium. He was proud of his family, including his wife and daughters, and granddaughters. As a student I did not fully realize that everything he asked of us, he

gave back to us ten-fold. His impact on his students' lives, as well as the lives of people with disabilities and those who care for them is immeasurable. He was the very embodiment of loyalty and devotion, both to people and to the science he loved. He took his students with him to enjoy amazing experiences in Gainesville and around the world and encouraged us all to find the greatness within ourselves, and to always order enough dessert to share.—**Sarah Bloom**

I sent Brian a letter in the early 2000s. Emails were already the standard of communication but I thought a letter would cause more of an impression and I would be more likely to get a reply. I asked to meet him at the next ABAI and there I invited him to a workshop in Granada, Spain. His love for Spanish art, especially works by Miró and Dalí, made him easy to convince. That was the first a series of visits to Spain or to wherever I happened to be living at the time. A memory from a 2009 visit in Segovia sticks with me: Brian almost fell on an inclined pebble street that follows the famous Roman aqueduct. Somehow I managed to catch him. He would often bring up that story with a chuckle. It's not often life lets you support a friend in such a literal way. I had the opportunity to reciprocate and visited Brian and Peg a few times in Florida. The Summer of 2008 I practically lived with them thanks to a visiting scholarship that he helped me win. Brian backed me up over the years with lots of research opportunities and career advice, even though he truly didn't have to. He was fundamentally generous. The last time I saw him was in Gainesville, just before COVID hit in December 2019. Saying goodbye, he walked us to the car and patted me on the back with some hesitancy. There was a second of silence and, I think, a sudden sadness to the moment. You never know when it's the last time you'll see a friend.—**Javier Virues-Ortega**

There are not enough words to express the magnitude of Brian's impact—on me, behavior analysis, others, or the world at large. I will be

forever grateful for his mentorship, generosity, and willingness to mentor until the end. The major lessons Brian taught me were academic, of course, but he also taught me a lot about generosity, patience, honesty, and forgiveness.—**Jennifer Haddock**

Brian gave—he gave of his time, shared his love of our science, and provided all of us so many opportunities. I had the opportunity to work with him twice given timing and circumstances and when I went “back” to school, I returned with my two young sons. Brian embraced and cared for them as well. One day as we were walking to class together, he asked how they were, and we spoke of sports and playdates. He realized that I had been missing some of their games due to Saturday morning lab meetings. He stopped me and told me not to miss any more and that he'd just as rather get back to tennis during those times. I learned from him to see my students, to make sure that they were “OK” and were doing well before diving into work. It is the simple truth that I would not be where I am if it were not for him. I'm so grateful for his mentorship and friendship.—**Leah Koehler**

Although I did not work with him as closely as some of his other students, I learned skills from him and his lab that have shaped values that I still hold today. His lab showed me what a science of behavior should look like, and for that I am forever grateful. Brian may not be with us here anymore, but the skills and values that he taught are, and the world is a better place for it.—**Jacob Asch**

I was a "descendant of sorts" of Brian. As an undergraduate at UF, I took my first Behavior Analysis class (3764) with Dorothea Lerman, then subsequently began the SIB Lab at “Taca.” My own father passed away when I was 17, so I received a lot of meaningful paternal and professional advice from Brian as an undergraduate and beyond. In my senior year at UF, I told him that I wanted to apply to graduate

school for behavior analysis, but that I wanted to work with children. He told me exactly where I should apply, and when I was accepted to work with Marjorie Charlop at Claremont McKenna and the Claremont Graduate University, he was genuinely proud and excited as Marji had been one of his post-docs at Kennedy Krieger years prior. Six years later in 2002, I had the unique opportunity to return as a Visiting Assistant Professor at UF, and continue to learn alongside Brian as a colleague for a couple of years. Obviously Brian was always proud of his graduate students' professional achievements and spoke of them often to me. However, I hope you all know how often he spoke of your unique interests, talents, and backgrounds; and how he selected each and every one of you due to these factors. And Peg, Mary, and Christina, he spoke of his love and pride for all of you more than you will ever know! Brian was prolific in every aspect of his life. Obviously as a teacher, researcher, clinician, and mentor. But also as a figure-head, both to his UF Family and his own beloved family. He was the epitome of integrity, a master problem-solver, an inventor, and he cultivated growth in everything and everyone he fostered. His precision of thought, speech, and writing was unparalleled. He taught me to always pay attention to and align all necessary details, but at the same time, to not get stuck in the weeds. He also taught me to never let pride get in the way of asking for help, nor seeking forgiveness. May we all find peace in knowing that what we have received from Brian will continue on, endlessly.—**Chris LaBelle**

It is difficult for me to adequately describe Brian's effect on my life. Sometimes I like to think he shaped me from very raw material into a scientist, educator, and (hopeful) contributor to the general good, but it was more than that. I wasn't just raw material. By the mid-1980s I had kicked around Florida for several years, largely moving from dead-end job to dead-end job (selling stereos in the mall, for crying out loud?) and indulging every 1980s Florida beach bum

stereotype. I took a few jobs working with folks with disabilities and I liked it, but there was really no future there for me. In fact, by the middle of 1986 I was looking for other work; working in developmental disabilities was too hard on the heart and I could barely get by on what I earned. On September 17, 1986, the facility I worked at sent me to a workshop sponsored by the Florida Association for Behavior Analysis. It was Brian Iwata, and he presented on the assessment and treatment of severe behavior disorders – something I'd actually seen quite a bit of but had absolutely no clue what to do about. What made no sense before made sense now, and it opened up a million possibilities for the folks I worked with. I really didn't understand how profoundly this experience would change my life until our consulting psychologist (the wonderful Cydney Yerushalmi, who was working for Brian's mentor Jon Bailey at the time) suggested – very strongly – that I either fish or cut bait (a somewhat more vulgar idiom may have been used). Brian had recently moved to the University of Florida and she encouraged me to apply to graduate school. Having absolutely no idea what that meant, I submitted my application and, somehow, at age 30 and 8 years out of my undergraduate training, Brian let me in (he said it had to do with me reporting having borrowed our facility's *JABA*'s to read at the beach, which was actually true). So, what Brian got in me was worse than raw material: it was damaged goods. Things changed after that. Brian taught me what graduate school was for (I really didn't know!) and what it meant to be a graduate student. He used any means necessary, and I was out of my element, so it was tough. He demanded so much. I recall being late on an assignment – there were only so many hours in the day, right? Brian asked “When was the last time you pulled an all-nighter?” I kind of laughed and said “Well, I guess when I was an undergrad, like 9 years ago.” Brian said “I did one two days ago.” So I learned what it meant to do what was necessary to be among the best at what we did. ALL of it:

the teaching, the mentoring, the research, the clinical work, the service to... well, everybody. And how important it was to be true and honorable in all those things. And that's just what Brian set about creating – repertoires that were built to perform at high levels, and to make substantial contributions to whatever purpose they set themselves to. He did that with me, and he did it over and over again with so many others. Each came with their own baseline and each required their own, individualized program – who wouldn't expect that Brian would take a function-based approach to us? He treated each of us differently, taking the time to figure out what each student's strengths and limitations were, how to fill the massive gaps in our repertoires, and how to motivate our best work. He treated us as junior colleagues, and the rewards that came along with that were disproportionate to the challenges associated with being a Brian student. He didn't just give us the most amazing professional opportunities (meeting all our heroes, participating in our journals, and so much more) but he treated student groups to fantastic dinners with colleagues, vacation travel, and memorable events (I'll never forget Joni Mitchell at the Merriweather Post Pavilion with Peg and Brian). I certainly didn't expect to love my graduate school advisor, and I absolutely didn't expect to receive love from him, but that's exactly what happened. I was able to express my love for Brian as we got older, and he for me; but his love for ALL of us had already been apparent in all he did for us, in so many ways, even after we were no longer his students (but were we really not?). I hope I have reflected some of Brian's love for (and substantial investment in!) me in my life and career. To the extent that his modeling helped define me as an academician and as a person, I am profoundly grateful. The gift of his guidance created a different, and vastly better life than I could have imagined for myself. I've had a rewarding career in which I can take some pride. I feel like I've done pretty well and also done some good, which is about all I can ask.

Just a week before he died, Dorothy Lerman and I had the opportunity to talk with Brian about the amazing life he had lived and the positive impact he had on so very many people – he took Dorothy and I by the hand and said “You ARE my life.” That was Brian. If you were his family member, or his student, or his client, or his friend, you were his life. What a privilege! He invested everything in us, and now I feel a strong responsibility to remember and honor his love. As long as I do that, I think I'll be OK.—

Richard Smith