

The first time I met John was eleven years ago, in 2006.

I was just appointed dean of the school and I was recruiting the two key Sr. Associate Deans- Academic Affairs and Research.

I knew John only by reputation- that he was a brilliant young faculty, a person of creative ideas and integrity, and one who was widely admired.

These were all key attributes for the person I was hoping to appoint- but

I had no clue that John would consider joining me at the dean's office.

As I found out at our first meeting, John had a decision to make: he was being heavily recruited by the University of Illinois, and having lost his father just a few years before, a relocation to Urbana would have given him more opportunities to visit his family in Des Moines.

To my great surprise- and profound delight- our conversation did not last very long. He immediately accepted to take the position. Since then, he never looked back - and the school was never the same again.

I would regularly ask John over the years, aware of his immense scientific potential, and all the personal and professional opportunities he was missing while pursuing an administrative career "*John, are you sure you want to continue in the dean's office?*" He would always reply "*Yannis, it is a great honor to serve.*"

At USC we have often used the term "transformative faculty" to denote faculty with non-trivial impact. John epitomized the term. He defined it



in its most real and impactful sense.

Joining USC after he graduated from Caltech, in 1997, he not only flourished as a scientist and engineer. Quietly and efficiently, he helped transform our collective culture.

Along with a number of other talented junior faculty who are USC Viterbi home products, and whom we are thrilled to have, he helped create a culture of excellence, a culture of confidence, a culture of ambition and a culture of achievement; one that takes ownership of and pride in their environment; one that needs no incentives or conditions, but it is proud to excel on its own sake; and one that keeps constantly building the foundation that enables others to flourish.

John *was* transformative. He was and will be for many years to come the quintessential role model for all our junior faculty- who are inspired to follow his footsteps in achievement, excellence, selfless devotion and a vision for making a true difference.

Isaac Newton was asked once to what he owes his scientific accomplishments. He famously answered “we stand on the shoulders of giants”.

When I reflect on the progress of the Viterbi School in the last decade I can only think that it has been possible because we all stood on John’s shoulders- myself, my team, the entire school.

John provided stability, in times of uncertainty; wisdom and impeccable judgement, in times of reflection and strategy; incessant work rate to help build a culture of ever increasing quality; and the opportunity for all of us to flourish in many forward-looking initiatives. In more ways than one, we all stood on John’s shoulders.

Personally, we shared many common traits. We both grew up in what in Greece we call “the provinces”. I grew up in the island of Rhodes, a small, wonderful place; John, in the outskirts of Des Moines, in the heart of America.

The vastness and dynamism of the sea, in my case, and of the farmland, in John’s case, provided optimism, endurance, commitment, self-reliance, and a vast horizon of possibilities- that all problems are solvable. We shared the same name (yes, you can google it).

We both grew in families of strong faith- a trait that shaped his unparalleled morality, selflessness and strength of conviction. We graduated from the same graduate school, after having attended the respective local university.

We both spent our entire academic careers in one place- USC. John loved sports- like I do. Now, he was not as much into *futbol* (as I was), but as knowledgeable as any on USC football and basketball and on all things baseball.

And we both played a musical instrument. Last Christmas was going to be the time, finally, when we would perform at the School’s Christmas party: a Dean’s office duo of accordion and guitar, with Dianne Demetras of EE the lead singer. Alas, a last minute change in my schedule did not allow this to happen. I will always regret it.

But we were also not identical: Take for example food, where John was your prototypical meat and potatoes guy. Now, he did try once grilled octopus (“force-fed” is a better term) in a Greek restaurant that Kelly Goulis chose in order to celebrate our #1 DEN rankings. We kept using that promise (or threat) of Greek food as a reward for all good things happening at Viterbi.

John was my right-hand person: I cannot recall a single time when we disagreed on strategy or on tactics- or an instance when he would come to my office to ask me for a personal favor. Not once. I would trust him implicitly and completely (*implicitly and completely*) for everything related to the school.

I truly stood on *his* shoulders. And so did the Viterbi School.

I cannot but mention a most remarkable, but rarely publicly acknowledged, accomplishment, one that in its absence would have led to dire consequences. And that was his steady and wise leadership during a critical two-year period for the Information Sciences Institute (ISI) when deftly and with remarkable ability guided its leadership transition to current Keston Executive Director Prem Natarajan. Since then, John continued serving as a strategic advisor to Prem and ISI and being its tireless champion. And ISI is stronger than ever.

John's loss is deeply felt across all aspects of USC Viterbi. From student and faculty recruitment to academic programs, to research and mentoring, to strategic directions. We will miss his work ethic, his collaborative and inclusive attitude- one based on character and ethics, respect and understanding, selflessness and kindness, service and commitment, and the constant pursuit of excellence.

We were fortunate that such a remarkable and talented human being crossed our paths and devoted his professional life to make us all better.

Since the announcement of his passing, I received almost 100 emails and messages of condolences. All with the same common theme: On how fortunate everyone has been for having interacted with John, and for his integrity, kindness and ingenuity that brightened their day.

We owe him a tremendous debt of gratitude.

To this effect, I have the privilege to announce that with the highest

respect, humility and affection we will name in his memory the soon to be completed nanofabrication facility in Michelson Hall.

This new, state-of-the-art, multimillion dollar facility was funded by an anonymous donor who gracefully accepted my request to name it after John. The John O'Brien Nanofabrication Laboratory, will be inaugurated on November 1, 2017, at the official opening of Michelson Hall. It will serve as a testament to his scientific excellence, his service, his relentless drive to make it a reality, from inception to completion.

It will keep alive in us and in future generations of students and faculty the memory of a friend, a colleague, a scientist and an engineer, but most of all a most remarkable human being, our beloved John O'Brien.