Peter Cedric Stein

June 16, 1932 – September 17, 2021

Peter Cedric Stein, Professor Emeritus of Physics and Nuclear Studies in the Department of Physics, died September 17, 2021, in Ithaca, New York.

Dr. Stein was a long-standing member of the Cornell community, arriving in Ithaca shortly after receiving his Ph.D. from MIT in 1956. Upon arrival, he began a postdoctoral position in the Department of Physics, where he stayed and became Professor of Physics and Nuclear Studies in 1967. He retired from the university in 2009 as Professor Emeritus.

Peter was born in Lewiston Maine on June 16, 1932, to Michael and Edna Stein. At the age of 16, he enrolled in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). It was here that he found his enduring love for physics. He bestowed this excitement onto his students, teaching those early in their studies through Ph.D. recipients. In addition to physics courses, he taught classes on science and policy of nuclear weapons. Dr. Stein relished in the process of experimental physics, beginning with his theorist colleagues’ hypotheses, through designing, building, and
implementing experimental set-ups, and finally, running the experiment to prove the theory. He was an early adopter of using modern computers in experimental physics.

Peter was a recipient of both Fulbright and Guggenheim fellowships and spent time away from campus at synchrotrons in Rome, Italy and Hamburg, Germany. His family joined him during this time abroad. He took up residency as a research fellow at the Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, a visiting professor at the Program in Science and Technology for International Security at MIT, a professional staff member for the House Committee on Armed Services in Washington D.C., and a research staff member at the Institute for Defense Analyses in Alexandria, Virginia. He co-authored dozens of articles with a broad range of collaborators that focused on his interests in arms control and national security policy.

Throughout Peter’s teaching and research career, he pursued roles on many university committees. He served as a faculty trustee, one year as Vice Provost, and five years as Dean of Faculty.

Dr. Stein was deeply committed to social justice and consistently proved to be an activist and change-maker. He was heavily involved in anti-war activism during the Vietnam War era. During the 1980s, Peter instituted the anti-war convocation at Cornell, this grew into an annual event and later became the basis for a national advocacy organization, the United Campuses to Prevent Nuclear War (UCAM). Many of his efforts aimed to support and improve the life experience of those around him. Peter was a life-long member of the Tompkins County Democratic Committee and the TCDC representative to the NYS Democratic Committee. After retiring, he served first on the Town Board for the Town of Ithaca, and then for two terms on the Tompkins County Legislature. He served on several community boards, including the TCAT Board of Directors, Cayuga Trails Club, and Lakeview Cemetery.

Peter and his wife Irene marked their 65th wedding anniversary shortly before he passed. They worked together to serve the
community in which they lived for many years, each leading in the pursuit of a better world through activism and county legislation. They often opened their home to members of the local democratic party as the political and social epicenter during election season.

Peter was a loving, devoted, and involved presence in the lives of his three children, five grandchildren, and his first great-grandchild. Peter imparted his appreciation for the bucolic landscape of upstate New York through hiking and camping with his family. He embraced and followed his passion for the arts, especially opera and theater, and global cultural and religious centers, as he explored the world through travel. He held a personal pilot license and would fly his Cessna plane from Ithaca to Washington and back. Peter enjoyed writing accurate, vivid, and often humorous diary entries that would later serve as the family chronicles.

Peter was predeceased by his parents, his brother Bob Stein and his sister Jane Stein, and his daughter Margaret Deborah Stein. He is survived by his wife of 65 years Irene Wald Stein of Ithaca, his daughter Melanie Ida Stein (Howard Reid) of Ithaca, son David Orlow Stein (Suzanne Morgan) of Takoma Park, Maryland, grandchildren Anna Margaret Stein (John Hoyt) of Bethel, Connecticut, Benjamin Joseph Stein of Chattanooga, Tennessee, Michael Christoph Morganstein of Baltimore, Maryland, Martha Deborah Morganstein of Baltimore, Maryland, Emma Isabel Morganstein of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and his great-granddaughter Eliza Charlotte Stein-Hoyt.

Written by Department of Physics