

In Memoriam Athina Markou

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‘Special’ is the word that comes most readily to mind when remembering Athina Markou. Our field lost a special person when Professor Athina Markou passed away on 18 May 2016, at home with her husband and Greek relatives, after a 4-year battle with cancer. In a life well lived, albeit too short, Athina accomplished a great deal, most visibly in her Neuropsychopharmacology career. But Athina was much more than a scientist: there was Athina the Greek citizen; Athina the adventurer; Athina the skier; Athina the balletomane; and Athina the friend/mentor/wife.

Athina was an exceedingly talented scientist. Growing up in Larisa, Greece, her mother encouraged her to learn and attend the American College of Greece in Athens to avoid ending up raising children in a Greek village. Finding a love of neuroscience and the concept of hedonia (*ἡδονή* in Greek), she entered graduate school at the University of Cincinnati and then the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). She completed her dissertation with Dr George Koob at The Scripps Research Institute, where she remained until she moved to UCSD as Professor of Psychiatry in 2006. In 2004, Dr Markou was the second woman to receive the Efron Award for Basic Science from ACNP. In recent years, she became the first woman in our Department of Psychiatry to take a leadership role as Vice Chair for Basic Research and founding leader of the Department’s Research Council. In 2 years while fighting cancer, she rejuvenated our research portfolio by recruiting new basic scientists to our faculty and initiating what became the Markou Research Seminar Series. Her scientific work has had a major impact, through publications, presentations, grants, mentees, and collaborations

too numerous to list (see <https://psychiatry.ucsd.edu/News/Pages/In-Memoriam-Dr-Athina-Markou.aspx>). The Markou Research Group combined sophisticated behavioral paradigms with state-of-the-art neurobiological methods to discover and develop novel pharmacotherapies targeting metabotropic glutamate and GABA-B receptors to ameliorate anhedonia in mental disorders and substance abuse. Dr Markou led international drug discovery programs combining academic and industrial laboratories that demonstrated the ability of validated rodent models to translate basic research into clinical practice. Since her newest National Institute of Health grant was fully funded two months after her passing, the Markou Research Group will continue her legacy and extend her research program into the future.

Despite living in the US since 1983, Greece remained her first home. She remained close to many relatives, remotely managed a rental business, remodeled the family beach house, and completely restored a 100-year old stone farmhouse on a remote and deserted Aegean beach lacking in water, power, and paved access. There she was known as Athina from Banikas. As requested, her ashes will spread off the three beaches she called home, one in Del Mar and two in the Aegean.

Athina the traveler enjoyed not only posh resorts or fine hotels in grand cities, but also adventurous treks, boat-trips, and climbs to remote places including Bhutan, Tierra del Fuego, Patagonia, Urubamba Valley, Machu Picchu, Bolivian Altiplano, Argentinian Andes, Costa Rican jungle, Rajasthan, Cappadocia, Bali, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, Solomon and Bismarck Seas, Great Barrier Reef, and New Zealand glaciers and forests. Her list of hoped-for adventures remained long and exciting, if only she had more time.

Though Athina always experienced life as part fish with an insatiable appetite for water, she was introduced to skiing in 1986 and only missed 1 year thereafter, skiing in the US, Canada, Argentina, Switzerland, France, and even Greece. In her last few months, she managed ski trips to Montana, where she drove her snowmobile off a mountain peak down a several hundred feet descent but cheated death by squeezing between two trees and plowing into deep powder after only 70 feet, and to the Winter Conference on Brain Research where she captured a Silver medal in her first-ever slalom race. Athina was always ready for one more ski run.

Athina the balletomane attended many performances and danced ballet whenever possible for many years, although she claimed little proficiency. She traveled the world just to see ballet or a favorite dancer. She adored Sylvie Guillem, seeing her in the US, England, France, Switzerland, and Japan. Between chemotherapy treatments, she flew to England to see Sylvie’s farewell tour at age 50.

Athina the friend/mentor/wife was uniquely special. Her friends were as diverse as her interests, with many life-long relationships. An extraordinary mentor, Athina guided trainees through both their academic careers and life courses,

especially the young women for whom she was such an important role model. Many mentees have become Department Chairs, industry leaders, or founders of companies that brought new drugs to the market. As her husband, I was particularly blessed to have Athina the Greek Goddess as the love of my life and best friend for 30 years, although we both wished for more. Her enthusiastic zest for life was infectious. Her brilliance, vibrancy, insatiable curiosity, determination, and fearlessness were evident to all who knew her. Fortunately, she took solace in knowing that she never hesitated to

live life fully, never put off an adventure for a quieter time, and accomplished things that will live on in the field and in the memories of the many individuals whose lives she impacted so positively. I and many others will long cherish our beloved and special Athina.

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