

Obituary Rolf Neth 1926-2020



Rolf Neth at age 92 in his home

Dear Wilsede Community,

With great sadness, we learned of the passing of Professor Dr. med. Rolf-Dietmar Neth, the founder of the Wilsede meeting, on March 17, 2020, aged 93. He is survived by his wife of 62 years Hanne-Lore and four sons and several grandchildren.

According to the legend, sometime in 1972, during a walk with Bob Gallo in the Lüneburg Heath, Rolf encountered the Spirit of Wilsede (the *Heidegeist* himself), who suggested he use the historic barn *de Emhoff* as the site for a scientific meeting “Modern Trends in Leukemia.” Most probably, any person but Rolf Neth would have sent the spirit to a far-off place and immediately forgotten such a “crazy idea.” Instead, Rolf made the meeting in this tiny village in the “middle of nowhere” his lifelong mission.

Rolf Neth and Bob Gallo in Wilsede

Only those who have ever participated in a Wilsede Meeting will fully understand what it meant to convince sponsors and scientists to support a meeting in such a remote location. Poor connection to airports or even large cities is one thing, but Wilsede is also in the center of a nature reserve; thus there are no cars or public transportation allowed—you can only get to *de Emhoff* by horse carriage, bicycle, or walking. Rolf Neth persevered and did not establish “just another leukemia meeting”—but made the Wilsede Meeting a scientific event that researchers all over the world were (and are) keen to attend. The list of participants over the last 50 years resembles the *Who’s Who* in disciplines ranging from retroviral oncology and hematopoietic development, through to B- and T-cell immunology and leukemogenesis, and up to the modern development of gene and immunotherapy. But quite frankly, it was not the big names that was/is the attraction, but the unforgettable atmosphere of open scientific debate and long-summer days in a unique landscape.



Rolf Neth was also eager to keep scientific borders open and established early connections with scientists from Eastern Europe, particularly the Soviet Union, during the cold war. In addition to coordinating essential medical collaborations after the Chernobyl accident, he organized, together with Elena I. Frolova (left, in picture), the first Volga-Wilsede Meeting in 1990, which was a surreal feat in itself. It is a sad coincidence that Professor Boris Afanasyev, the St. Petersburg organizer of the Wilsede-Neva meeting (standing behind Rolf Neth in picture) died on March 16, 2020, one day before Rolf Neth.



Rolf Neth & his wife with leading Russian hematologists

Rolf Neth organized the first Wilsede meetings himself for more than 20 years, until he passed the baton to Wolfram Ostertag and Axel Zander. In the late 1990s, Carol Stocking and Boris Fehse took over, and the last meetings have been organized by Nicolaus Kröger and Boris Fehse. And as long as his health permitted, Rolf Neth came along to see how his baby was doing.

For us, his successors, Rolf made it easy. Nowadays, if you try to organize a scientific meeting, it is really difficult to get the speakers you want. Wilsede has always been different – if someone could not participate, they sent a long explanation ending with “keep me on the list for the next meeting.” This is certainly due to Rolf, who was able to translate the “Magic” of Wilsede into a very special and outstanding scientific meeting. This has also been recognized by the meeting’s longtime sponsor, German Cancer Aid, who made the Wilsede Meeting one of their two bi-annual meetings.

We are thankful to have had the privilege of knowing Rolf Neth and to cherish his legacy by keeping the Wilsede tradition alive.

Boris Fehse, Nicolaus Kröger, Carol Stocking, Axel Zander

A (very) partial list of the participants (A-Z) over the years impresses with the many Nobel laureates and other famous scientists: Fritz Anders, Hartmut Beug, Michael Bishop, Thomas Blankenstein, Harald von Boehmer, Constanze Bonifer, Dominique Bonnet, Arsene Burny, Ruud Delwel, Michael Dexter, John Dick, Peter Duesberg, Elaine Dzierzak, Cynthia Dunbar, Connie Eaves, Fred Falkenburg, Robert Gale, Robert Gallo, Bertie Göttgens, John Goldman, Margaret Goodell, Els Goulmy, Thomas Graf, Mel Greaves, Tony Green, Frank Grosveld, Rüdiger Heilmann, Tessa Holyoake, Tasuko Honjo, Bill Haseltine, Harald zur Hausen, Peter Hans Hofschneider, Keith Humphries, Tim Hunt, Norman Iscove, Rudolf Jaenisch, Phil Koeffler, Hans-Jochem Kolb, Tsvee Lapidot, Fritz Melchers, Simon Mendez-Ferrer, Matthias Merckenschlager, Nicholas „Av“ Mitchison, Kateri Moore, Malcolm A. Moore, William Moloney, Wolfram Ostertag, Emmanuelle Passegué, Donald Pinkel, Klaus Rajewsky, Ulf Rapp, Janet Rowley, Timm Schroeder, Sol Spiegelman, Hans Stauss, Fred Stohlman, Howard Temin, Dan Tenen, Donnell Thomas, Karl Welte, Peter Vogt, David Williams, and many more...