David was born on January 3, 1933, in Seattle, Washington, to Evan Uphus and Polly Emery. He was originally named Reed Uphus, but after his parents’ divorce, his mother married Joseph Wolfe, and Reed was formally adopted and renamed David Emery Wolfe. He was an avid skier in his youth. He attended the University of Washington before serving as a hospital corpsman in the US Navy during the Korean War, although he never saw combat. After this, he matriculated at Columbia College, New York, beginning what was to be a lifelong passion for living in that city. His academic career was nothing short of brilliant; he graduated Phi Beta Kappa Summa Cum Laude in Philosophy with the class of 1956. He then studied medicine at Columbia Physicians & Surgeons where he was elected to Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society in his junior year. He received an MD in 1960. That same year, he married Shelagh Foreman.

Instead of taking clinical training after medical school, he was appointed as a postdoctoral fellow at the Laboratory of Neuroanatomical Sciences of what was then National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Blindness of the National Institutes of Health. David was interested in the newly emerging field of electron microscopy and began to apply this technology to issues in neuroscience. In 1962, working with Julius Axelrod, he was first author on an article in Science entitled, ‘‘Localizing tritiated norepinephrine in sympathetic axons by electron microscopic autoradiography’’ (1). This was long before immunogold techniques had become available and accomplishing the use of tritium autoradiography in conjunction with electron microscopy was a true tour de force. The article contained a 3-part illustration that has become an iconic photographic image in the history of neuroscience. For the first time, it clearly demonstrated that the granulated vesicles in the sympathetic axons of the pineal gland contained the neurotransmitter norepinephrine. Although it had been suspected that these vesicles contained packaged neurotransmitter, David’s micrographs demonstrated conclusively that this was the case. It was a picture worth 1,000 words. In 1970, Dr. Axelrod won the Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine for this and his many other contributions to our understanding of neurotransmission, especially regarding norepinephrine. Axelrod, who was widely noted for his humility and his kindness to his fellows, specifically acknowledged David’s contributions to his work in his Nobel address. Many years later, and in a rather offhand way, David shared a postcard he had received from Dr. Axelrod that was postmarked from Stockholm in which his mentor thanked him for his contributions, which had led to his receiving the Nobel Prize.

In 1963, David moved from the National Institutes of Health to Boston as an Instructor in the Department of Anatomy at Harvard Medical School, then a leading center for the electron microscopic characterization of many organs, including the brain. In 1968, he joined the Department of Anatomy at the Pennsylvania State University Medical Center. After a 6-year tenure there, he decided to return to New York to take training in anatomic pathology and neuropathology. He had become interested in diagnostic neuropathology and realized that he greatly enjoyed the challenge of working up difficult clinical cases.

From 1974 to 1976, he taught anatomy and was a resident in anatomic pathology at Albert Einstein Medical Center of Yeshiva University, where he became certified in neuropathology and anatomic pathology.

In 1976, he received an appointment as Professor of Pathology at the University of Miami Medical Center; he also became an attending neuropathologist and director of Diagnostic Microscopy at Jackson Hospital. He continued his academic career with an appointment at Wayne State University in Detroit, where he also worked as a neuropathologist in area hospitals.

In 1986, I (Daniel P. Perl) was appointed Director of the Neuropathology Division at the Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York and needed someone to take charge of its large and complex diagnostic service. In considering possible candidates, David Wolfe seemed the obvious choice. I called Robert Terry, who had served as his former mentor and chair...
at Albert Einstein and asked him if he thought David was up to the job. Bob simply said, ‘‘David Wolfe is the smartest person I have ever worked with and is a superb neuropathologist.’’ Terry’s department had trained some of the most talented research and diagnostic neuropathologists and neuroscientists in the world so this was quite an impressive assessment for me to consider.

Based on Bob’s recommendation, I hired David and, for the next 20 years, he led the diagnostic service at Mount Sinai. He was a gifted diagnostic surgical neuropathologist with an experienced eye for detail. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of the literature, knowing the details of both the classic papers of the past as well as cutting-edge findings then being published. He would use that knowledge plus his keen analytic mind to evaluate cases to deliver the correct diagnosis. It appeared that, the more complex the diagnostic problem, the better David enjoyed the challenge.

David was an excellent teacher of residents and fellows. He did not suffer fools and was repelled by intellectual laziness. He especially enjoyed working with trainees who were eager to learn and were willing to put in the effort to try to keep up with him.

David was also a gifted photographer with a trained artistic eye. He approached photographing cases with that background and often spent hours getting the correct color balance, contrast, and, in particular, composition of his photomicrographs. He was skilled in the darkroom and, through choices in filters and film (in the days before Photoshop), could produce case photos that were both scientifically informing and works of art. The composition of his photos was especially important to David, and he spent time to make sure extraneous and irrelevant distracting elements were removed from his images. I shared some of these interests and, for me, watching his presentation at a tumor board was a unique experience in seeing the interphase of science, medicine, and art through the pictures of his cases.

In 1989, he presented the morphologic features of a newly identified form of neuroaxonal dystrophy, Schindler disease, which is related to a deficiency in N-acetylgalactosaminidase, at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Neuro-pathologists (of which he was a member throughout his career). David worked long and hard on this presentation, taking literally thousands of photomicrographs and electron microscopic images of a brain biopsy and autopsy on the first diagnosed case. This presentation showed David Wolfe in his element, and he especially wanted to choose the most informing and also most pleasing illustrations of the case for his 10-minute presentation. It was a visually spectacular demonstration of morphology as presented by a uniquely talented scientist/artist. The paper won the Matthew T. Moore Award for the best clinical presentation of the meeting, and the findings were subsequently published in the New England Journal of Medicine (2).

David was also a licensed medical examiner in the states of Florida and Michigan, where he worked with Coroner’s offices in the cities of Detroit and Miami. After his retirement, he served as an expert witness in a number of shaken baby cases.

He had remarried Virginia (Gia) Segal, who predeceased him in 2012.

David was a consummate New Yorker; no one took more advantage of the cultural activities in the city than he did. He was a student of art and film, and he and his wife Gia were a constant presence in numerous coffee houses, avant-garde cinemas, on and off Broadway theaters, art galleries, and concert halls throughout the city, especially in the West Village neighborhood in which they lived. David did not dabble in his outside interests; he pursued them deeply. He could speak knowledgeably and at length about a remarkably wide range of topics. He was the only one I ever knew who would religiously read every issue of the New York Review of Books from cover to cover. He would frequently share articles that he thought I would be interested in, complete with his numerous insightful and frequently humorous (and irreverent) comments lining their margins. He continued to pursue his interest in photography and, with an array of extremely expensive professional-level equipment, he produced magnificent photographs (mostly in black and white) related to his travels as well as ordinary objects (especially their cats) in his apartment. In another life, I am certain that his abilities as a photographer could have supported a distinguished career in that endeavor.

David was a uniquely gifted and complex individual. For those of us who took the time to get to know him, we cherished his friendship and found him to be a fascinating, brilliant, and multifaceted person. He had a quirky sense of humor and throughout his life enjoyed using his extremely talented intellectual capabilities in pursuit of his numerous interests. He will be missed by his many professional and personal friends. He was a person out of another era and, as they say, “they don’t make them like that anymore.”

After retiring, David moved to The Forest at Duke, a retirement community associated with Duke University in the Raleigh-Durham area. As might be expected, soon after arriving in that community, he formed a film society that was extremely popular. David died of respiratory failure at Duke University Hospital in Durham, North Carolina, on June 3, 2014. He is survived by his first wife Shelagh Foreman, his 2 children Alexander Emery Wolfe and Gillian Fraser Wolfe Ware, and 2 grandchildren Ian Xavier Ware and Imani Mairae Ware.

Alex Wolfe
Daniel P. Perl, MD

REFERENCES