

Ralph Nicholls
1926-2008



Ralph W. Nicholls was a distinguished research professor emeritus (physics) at York University, director emeritus of the Centre for Research in Earth & Space Science (CRESS) and a member of the Order of Canada.

A pioneer in the Canadian space science community, Prof. Nicholls died suddenly and peacefully in his home early Friday morning, Jan. 25. He was 81.

Prof. Nicholls was the founding Chair of York's Department of Physics (1965-1969) in what is now the Faculty of Science & Engineering, and founding director of CRESS (1965-1992). Just before his death, he was helping to produce a history of the Faculty of Science and Engineering.

"I met him when I first came to York," said Nick Cercone, dean of the Faculty, who arrived in the summer of 2006. "He had such a keen mind and was such an active person. I can't believe he's gone."

Nicholls will be sorely missed, said Cercone. "York would not be what it is today without Ralph. We owe him a lot. "

A colourful and passionate person, Prof. Nicholls remained very involved in the life of the University and was devoted to his students. His research career focused on the many experimental, theoretical and observational aspects of the spectra of small molecules.

Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus Gordon Shepherd, the current director of CRESS, offered this appreciation of his longtime friend and colleague: "Ralph Nicholls was a scientist of great vision, always looking far into the future. Thus he came from Imperial College, London, England, to the University of Western Ontario full of enthusiasm for establishing atmospheric spectroscopy in Canada. He attracted brilliant students who moved out around the world, keeping him well connected internationally.

"Soon after, the space age began, and he saw the role that spectroscopy would play in this new endeavour. So after arriving at the new York University campus in 1965, one of his immediate accomplishments was to found the Centre for Research in Earth & Space Science, a vehicle for space research that would make a significant contribution to the national space program, but would also involve Canada internationally.

"But Ralph was also a person of great humanity. He understood that his vision would be carried out by people, and so it was, in the process creating careers for energetic young scientists that CRESS attracted, many of whom have made major contributions to space science in Canada and worldwide.

"His greatest pleasure was in helping people, especially young people. This accounts for the enormous number of individuals who are remembering him now, and will do so for many years to come.

"I encountered him first as an MSc student at my first conference; he easily attracted attention. Later he hired me and provided a base for my research at York University; we have been close

colleagues for many years. I am one of the many that are indebted to him and I will always remember his enthusiastic encouragement and his jovial laughter echoing in the hallway."

Prof. Nicholls was made a Fellow of the American Physical Society (1976), the Royal Society of Canada, Academy of Science (1978), the Optical Society of America (1978), the Canadian Aeronautics and Space Institute (1979), and the UK Institute of Physics (1956). He was a visiting professor of aeronautics and astronautics, Stanford University, and visiting lecturer, NASA Ames Research Center, Mountainview, Calif. He was made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1998.

Prof. Nicholls leaves his wife, Doris, a York professor emerita of biology.

Credits to York University