

Friedhelm Kirchfeld 1940-2011

by Tyler Smith

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Friedhelm Kirchfeld, who started the first naturopathic and botanical medicine library at the National College of Natural Medicine (NCNM) in Portland, OR, passed away after complications from Alzheimer's disease at the age of 71 on July 14, 2011. He was known for amassing the school's extensive rare books collection and as the co-author of *Nature Doctors* (NCNM Press, 1994), an acclaimed history of naturopathy in America.

Born and raised in Germany, Kirchfeld came to the United States in the 1960s, bringing with him an encyclopedic knowledge of the history of naturopathic medicine. He was hired as NCNM's first library director in 1978.

"He created this library from scratch," said Rick Severson, NCNM's current library director (oral communication, September 29, 2011). "NCNM is an academic institution and like all academic institutions, the library is an essential part of the curriculum. Our little library is at the heart of the institution."

Catherine Downey, the Associate Dean of Academic Progress at NCNM, explained how Kirchfeld's background contributed to his passion for natural medicine. "A big part of the base of naturopathic medicine was from Europe and Germany and that was part of his fascination," she said (oral communication, October 5, 2011). "It was part of his cultural history as well as the history of naturopathic medicine."

Severson described Kirchfeld as an extremely humble, soft-spoken man who retained a heavy German accent, even decades after moving to the United States. "He never gave up his German heritage," Severson said. "He was very knowledgeable about medicine and passionate about it because naturopathy... comes out of the German 'Water Cure' tradition. He believed in this medicine strongly."

Kirchfeld, along with other distinguished European naturopath scholars, played an important role in the naturopathy renaissance in the 1970s. "He met doctors Bastyr [for whom Bastyr University was named], Boucher, and all of those older gentlemen; he knew them," said Downey. "They kept it alive through the dark ages, so to speak. I would say that Friedhelm had a spirit and you could just see it in his eyes—an excitement about what he was doing."

As many of the pioneers of the naturopathic tradition died out, Friedhelm started the rare books room at NCNM with donations from their collections. "He would meet these older doctors and have a rapport with them, and then he would get their books. They would be bequeathed to the library and he was instrumental in that," Downey explained. "I think the rare books room is something he'd be most proud of. He searched high and low for [those] books."

Kirchfeld was known for his dedication to the school and the rare books collection, which is named in his honor. "He had an encyclopedic memory for the collection. Somebody could ask him a question and he would know when he acquired a book, where it was on the shelf, and he didn't have to look it up," said Severson. "He had the geography of the place in his mind. He was impressive in that way."

Cascade Anderson Geller, an herbalist who met Friedhelm in 1978—a year before she started as a professor of botanical medicine at NCNM—described him as a truly dedicated librarian. "People would come in and instead of going to the card catalog, they would go directly to Friedhelm," she said (oral communication, January 18, 2011). "He introduced me to the treasures of that library, and I wouldn't have discovered many of them on my own. He really kept the library a sacred space."

Kirchfeld would often hold afternoon tea and discussions, and he rented out a room in his house for students for many years. "He was really gracious and loved the students here," Severson said. "He was a beloved figure amongst our students especially."

Today, the library contains over 16,000 volumes and approximately 1,600 volumes of books and periodicals in the rare books room, Downey says. "Even though it was difficult work because he had no budget at all, [Friedhelm] was able to create something out of almost nothing and get the library going," she said.

Kirchfeld is survived by his wife, Sarah Stein-Kirchfeld, his sons, David and Aaron, as well as his sister, Andrea Fischbach, and her family.

—Tyler Smith