

# Historical Notes on the DNA Fountain

Van R. Potter, Professor of Oncology at the McArdle Laboratory for Cancer Research, was chairman of the Building Committee for what became the Middleton Library, named in honor of the former Dean of the Medical School.

After the building was completed, Potter happened to go to the Madison Art Fair on the Square with his wife and was impressed with some small sculptures made from copper tubing and designed to be faithful replicas of some natural life form such as a sprouting wheat embryo. The artist was young architect, Tom Hibben, from North Chicago who created these objects as a hobby. They were designed to function as water fountains.

Some weeks later, Potter recalled his own design of a paper model kit based on a natural life-form, the DNA molecule, and conceived a scaled-up model made from copper tubing and functioning as a fountain. After some effort, he recovered the name and address of the young architect and drove to the North Chicago address. The artist was excited by the idea and, though encouraged to take artistic liberties with the design, he was determined to be as faithful to it as possible.

Returning to Madison, Potter had to find some money for the project. He went to Ralph Hawley, then Business Manager and Alumni Secretary-Treasurer of the Medical Alumni. Hawley uncovered an unused class donation of \$900 that could be used in the spirit of the donors. The artist accepted that sum and produced the present fountain in 1967 after building and tearing down three models before being satisfied with the product. On the edge of the basin one can see that the work is entitled "Genetic Model I" by "T.Hibben, 67".

Virginia Holtz, then Director of the Middleton Library, after extensive consultation, agreed to Potter's suggestion that the fountain be moved to the Genetics/Biotechnology Center Building, since the library staff had been unable to keep the water flowing through the fountain's recirculatory system and it was proposed that the technical staff at the Biotechnology Center could do the job.

Richard Burgess, then Director of the Biotechnology Center, was enthusiastic to have this unique and highly appropriate fountain located in the building atrium and personally carried it over to the newly completed building in the spring of 1996.

DNA is the ultimate icon of both genetics and biotechnology and this fountain adds esthetically to the atmosphere of this frequent gathering place for the biology community. It is ironic that Burgess, during his graduate career, had a Potter paper model of DNA hanging over his desk, the very model that inspired this fountain. Perhaps this DNA fountain will inspire one of the many young visitors to this building to pursue a career studying DNA and uncovering the many mysteries.