

“I grew up in the outdoors, in nature. I’ve always been fascinated by nature, by the cosmos, by where we came from.” Though Howard Nornes was born and raised in a tiny Minnesota town of 375, his love for life and for science proved impressively far-reaching.

He was born on April 27, 1931. Throughout his childhood, Howard worked on his father’s and neighbors’ farms. “We didn’t have much money, so whatever we did, we had to create ourselves,” he remembers. Playing a sport every season, he thrived on an active childhood outdoors. Always knowing that he would attend college, he went straight to Concordia College after high school. Though he declares he was mainly an athlete, playing varsity basketball and track, he eventually settled on a major in biology. After graduating, he was drafted by the army and spent over a year in Germany working as a lab technician in an army hospital. After his service, Howard secured a job coaching basketball and track and teaching biology at a large suburban school in Minneapolis, where he stayed for nine years.

“It was an amazing time to be intellectually active,” he recalls. He explains that after the launch of Sputnik, many people in the U.S. woke up. “It was time for our country to start doing better in the sciences.” Because of these national developments, Howard was accepted into the National Science Foundation’s Summer Institute Program, which allowed him to earn his master’s degree at Purdue University in four summers, while still maintaining his teaching job. When asked by the department head at Purdue what his goals were after earning his master’s, Howard responded, “I’m going to buy a cabin up in northern Minnesota and, instead of coming down to Purdue, I’m going to teach and coach.” However, he was pursued by the department and three months later, he decided to begin doctoral studies. During this time, he not only managed the entire graduate program – composed of over two-hundred graduate students – but he also prepared his groundbreaking dissertation on the correlation of the birthdates of spinal chord cells with axon growth. “It was just a beautiful experience,” he remembers.

After being spotted presenting a paper at a conference, Howard was invited to CSU in 1972. He was especially sought out for his experience in neuroscience and embryonic science. Spending over thirty years at CSU before retiring in 2002 with the rank of full professor, Howard made critical advancements in his field. His research flourished, tackling topics such as stem cell biology, regeneration and development of cells, embryonic biology, and molecular biology of the nervous system. His studies have taken him to Sweden to learn from pioneers in stem cell biology and to Germany to be trained in techniques of molecular techniques. He has produced thirty to forty papers and mentored sixteen to twenty graduate students.

“The biggest rewards were being able to get the support and have mentoring and have opportunities to continue to support what I wanted to do. I had some pretty idealistic and big dreams about the development of the nervous system, and I was able to keep growing and developing in the field... working with graduate students was amazing,” Howard recalls. He advises new professors, “Don’t take yourself too seriously, and have some fun! We get so serious about producing and about standards.” He emphasizes the importance of “cutting edge research,” explaining, “Your better researchers are your better teachers.”

“I didn’t get the cabin in northern Minnesota, but I got a very rich and exciting life living in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains here in Fort Collins.” He adds, “Thank you to CSU, thank you to all of my mentors, and, particularly, thank you to my wife Sonya, who was an amazing support to me.”