Norman Lichtin Helped Build Chemistry Department
Former chair dies at 89

By Cynthia K. Buccini

Norman Lichtin had a long and distinguished career as a professor and chair of the College of Arts & Sciences chemistry department, a researcher, and a mentor to graduate and undergraduate students alike.

But Scott Mohr, a CAS professor of chemistry, notes that for Lichtin, family always came first. “Those who knew Norman well would surely understand this priority,” Mohr writes in a tribute to his friend and colleague. “His marriage to Phyllis Selma Wasserman lasted for one month short of 65 years and produced three children, whom he delighted in talking about.”

During Lichtin’s time as chair, Mohr recalls, he and his wife entertained department faculty and staff in their Newton Centre home. “These parties had the atmosphere of extended family occasions and reflected the departmental spirit of friendship and camaraderie that Norman strove to foster.”

Lichtin, a CAS professor emeritus of chemistry, knew Lichtin during his entire tenure as chemistry department chair. “He was always fair-minded,” Laursen says. “He was also fiercely proud of the department and was one of its biggest boosters.” Lichtin wrote a history of the department, which was established in 1904 and is the University’s oldest natural science department.

Mohr says Lichtin’s research interests in both physical and organic chemistry led him to the fields of photochemistry and radiation chemistry. “Those in turn spawned a strong involvement with solar energy research,” he says. “He also had no qualms about getting involved with practical applications of research and served as a consultant to at least nine companies seeking to develop photochemistry for energy conversion.”

Lichtin, who also was a University Professor emeritus, retired from BU in 1993. Outside of BU, Lichtin was involved in Temple Emmanuel in Newton, where he sang in the choir, in the local Democratic Party, and in the Newton Public Schools, where he helped teach children to read, according to Mohr, who had known Lichtin since he joined the faculty in 1969. He describes his friend as a straight shooter: “He told you what he thought,” he says, “and he always kept his promises.”

He was also a workaholic, Mohr says, teaching, serving on committees, and conducting research. “I personally observed on many occasions that when he was ready to leave his office (even late in the day), he often carried two bulging briefcases,” Mohr says. “He did like to get away to the rustic family cabin in Rangeley, Maine, for some weeks during the summer, but even then—as recounted by his son Harold—he would walk from the cabin to the town’s small general store, where he could use a pay phone to call up the people in his lab and get an update on their research.”

“He was a loyal and constant friend,” Mohr says, “generous and kind.”