42. The Surprise Party

George Sherman

In the summer of 1975 during the time when I was an Assistant Professor in the Institute I had a summer appointment at the Technical University of Helsinki in Finland. While there, I worked with a Finnish graduate student named Ari Friberg. In contrast to the more formal relationships between Finnish professors and their students that he was used to, we had a more casual relationship and became good friends. I think he assumed that this was

Danette Ryan, Ari Friberg, and Glenn Tyler at the Optics Picnic, 1975.
just the way it is at American universities. Ari decided he wanted to continue to work with me after I returned to Rochester, so he enrolled as a graduate student in The Institute of Optics. Since I was stopping at two other universities on the way home, we flew to Rochester on different flights and he arrived a couple of weeks ahead of me and stayed in my home while arranging for a place to live. By the time I arrived home from Europe, my wife and kids loved him and he had become a member of the family. After he moved into graduate-student housing, he would often drop by our house to visit us, usually around dinner time.

One night, well into his first term at school, he and several other Institute graduate students were out on the town partying late. Since they weren’t ready to stop partying when the bars closed and they had no other source of beer, Ari suggested that they all go to “George’s” house where there surely would be plenty of what they had in mind. The other students didn’t know who this “George” was; but if he didn’t mind Ari coming in for beer at 2:00 a.m. with a bunch of friends, that was fine with them. So they all came, Ari located the hidden key, and they came in and helped themselves to beer from our refrigerator. Before long, I was awakened by boisterous laughter coming from our living room downstairs. Since it didn’t seem to be the way that thieves would be behaving, I wasn’t overly alarmed, so I put on a bathrobe and went downstairs to check it out.

I will never forget the look of terror on those students’ faces when they suddenly realized that they had let themselves into the home of and were drinking the beer of their Physical Optics professor. The only way I could figure out to reassure them that everything was OK was to sit down and have a beer with them. Or maybe it was two beers.

George Sherman was Assistant Professor of from 1970 to 1976.
Ari Friberg was a Ph.D. student in Optics from 1975 to 1981, and is currently Professor of Physics at the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden.