

CAMPUS

Bahram Momen, UMD statistics professor who “wanted to change the system,” dies at 62

By Michael Brice-Saddler

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Bahram Momen, a father, research consultant and University of Maryland statistics professor, died Monday. He was 62.

Momen, who immigrated to the United States from Iran in 1984, worked as a professor in the environmental science and technology department since it was formed in 2006, Department Chair William Bowerman said. He primarily taught graduate courses in statistics, though he also served as a consultant for students and faculty for their research.

The cause of death was a heart attack, according to his daughter, Sara Momen.

She described her father as someone who was always “thirsting after knowledge” while remaining loyal to his family.

“His students brightened his life. I don’t think he could’ve been happy doing anything besides what he was actually doing,” she said. “His life was his family and work. Nothing else mattered to him, he was so devoted.”

Bowerman described Bahram Momen as a “master instructor,” and said his ability to help students grasp complex ideas and understand the theories and philosophy behind statistical methods set him apart from other professors. He created an environment where scholars could excel, Bowerman said, and met with students frequently outside of the classroom.

“I’ve had a lot of statistics courses, and I’ve never seen an instructor that truly got the learning in statistics across to students,” Bowerman said. “I’ve never seen anything like it. He just loved to teach and work with students.”

As an applied statistician and consultant for the department, Momen spent much of his time helping students and faculty with their projects and research. Barret Wessel, a graduate research fellow in the environmental science and technology department, said he met Momen for the first time in 2013 following a seminar Momen gave on common statistical pitfalls.

Wessel, who was attempting to complete a project for a capstone course at the time, said he was having a lot of trouble with the advanced statistics. He decided to reach out to Momen for help.

"He mentioned that he had an open door policy and that anyone could come and talk to him anytime," Wessel said. "I just knocked on his door and poked my head in. He sat down with me and spent a good 20 to 30 minutes drawing out plots and things."

Although he was friendly, Wessel said Momen was not afraid to let people know when they'd made a mistake to get them back on the right track.

"He might've rubbed some people the wrong way with how thorough he was, but that's what makes a good scientist," Wessel said. "You have to point out the problems with what people are doing."

Nathan Sedghi, a doctoral student in the environmental science and technology department, was enrolled in Momen's class this semester. He said his professor was often critical of certain methods used in academia and science, especially the way the some people apply statistical methods.

To rectify this, Sedghi said, Momen worked to ensure his students knew how to apply statistical concepts in ways that would help them become better scientists.

"Bahram's specific message was he wanted to change the system," Sedghi said. "He used to tell us we were his hope," he added.

While his specialty was advanced statistics, Bowerman said Momen was also adept in ecology, forest engineering and agriculture. Momen received a doctorate in environmental science and statistics from the University of California, Berkeley. Because of his diverse background, Momen was eager to help students and faculty spanning a variety of fields, even outside of statistics.

"Everybody was open to his help," Bowerman said. "He was really just a kind and nice man."

Momen received several awards for his teaching, including a teaching award in 2005 from this university's chapter of Gamma Sigma Delta, an international honor society of agriculture.

He was also awarded the Paul R. Poffenberger Excellence in Teaching and Advising Award in 2005 from this university's agriculture and natural resources college, according to the environmental science and technology department website.

"It's a big loss for us to have somebody that nice and that dedicated to the students and the craft of teaching," Bowerman said. "To lose him, that's quite a loss."

Momen is survived by his wife, Shahpar Momen, his son, Ali Momen, and his daughter. His funeral will be Sunday at 11 a.m. at Parklawn Memorial Park and Menorah Gardens cemetery in Rockville.

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