

Mystery friend was 'Spider-Man'

Web of facts leads to professor's ID

By TIM SIMMONS
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Monica Price never knew it, but her family was one of many caught in the web of Peter Witt.

Months ago, Price started looking for a forgotten friend — someone who had helped her grandparents in 1967 after the Ku Klux Klan poisoned their well and burned a cross in their yard.

What she found was a friend to many, a man with a strong commitment to civil rights and someone who was known worldwide.

"He has a fascinating background," Price said, "and so

many people knew the family."

Witt, who died in 1998, was best known for his research involving spiders, which attracted international attention in the 1950s and 1960s. But Price's grandparents did not see Witt as a well-known researcher.

They saw him and his family as neighbors who supported them when Isham High, Price's grandfather, decided to enroll two of his children in a previously all-white public school in Knightdale.



Price began her hunt for Witt in July.

Growing up, Price had heard stories of a white family — possibly a professor at N.C. State University — who became friends with her grandparents after an attack by KKK members, helping them rally support and raise money to dig a new well. But High didn't dwell on the story. As time dimmed memories and Price's grandparents died, most of the details were lost.

Then Price took a job at NCSU in July and decided she should reconnect with that part of the family's history. Her efforts were detailed in a story last week in The News & Observer that prompted several dozen people to respond. While

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a German professor who studied spiders might have seemed an unusual target in Price's search, virtually all of the readers said Witt was surely the person she was hoping to find.

His background, they said, helps explain why.

Born in Germany in 1918, Witt was training to be a doctor after the Nazis gained control of the government. Given a Nazi uniform at the end of his studies, Witt chose to burn the uniform and hide from authorities while working at an underground hospital near Berlin.

His wife, Inge, whom he met later, also left Germany during the years of Nazi control. Their friends say the experience shaped their views about social issues. Active in civil rights, it was perfectly natural for them to reach out and support someone like Price's grandparents once High decided the children of a sharecropper were entitled to the same education as other students.

The two men came from entirely different worlds, but they shared a similar sense of justice and determination.

Leaving Germany

After World War II, Witt moved to Switzerland, where a *Life* magazine article eventually drew the world's attention to his work with spiders. Witt discovered that drugs such as LSD, amphetamines, marijuana and tranquilizers had specific and predictable effects on the webs



The late Peter Witt, a former NCSU professor known worldwide for his experimental work with spiders, is also remembered for helping Monica Price's family after a KKK attack.

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created by spiders.

Spiders given amphetamines, for example, seemingly lost the ability to recreate patterns they might spin on any other day. Those given LSD created per-

fectly symmetrical webs that lacked any of the expected variations needed to catch flies. The webs were an excellent tool for measuring the effects of drugs because of a spider's innate abil-

ity to spin some of the most efficient designs found in nature.

Witt's work was cited for years by researchers in various fields from the study of behaviors to the treatment of mental illnesses. He

moved to Raleigh in 1966 to take a job as director of the division of research for North Carolina's Department of Mental Health.

'Spider-Man' to some

Those who knew about his work in the labs of Dorothea Dix called him "Spider-Man," but at NCSU and UNC-Chapel Hill, he was Professor Witt, an adjunct faculty member. It was this tie to NCSU that Price knew from the family stories.

But to others in Knightdale, the Witts were known for something altogether different — a 35-acre farm where they kept exotic animals. The occasional escape of the guanaco, which resembles a llama, is still part of the town's local lore among older residents.

While in Knightdale, Inge Witt was also known for her work in low-income schools, which remained largely segregated at the time.

The couple eventually moved to Raleigh in 1988 and built a home near the historically black Oberlin community in 1994, where Witt displayed artwork, said Richard Hall, a local architect and close family friend.

Witt was 79 when he died. "All of this has been an education for me," said Price, who has exchanged e-mail messages with one of Witt's daughters in suburban Atlanta. "I'm looking forward to re-establishing ties with their family, and I really want to thank those who helped me find this link."

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