The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Paul Olfesky, professor emeritus, music, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Dean P. Neikirk, Secretary
General Faculty and Faculty Council

IN MEMORIUM
PAUL OLEFSKY

Cellist Paul Olefsky enjoyed an unusually varied musical career as a soloist, chamber musician, orchestral player, and teacher and had been associated with The University of Texas at Austin since 1974, first as professor of cello and since 2002 as professor emeritus.

Paul was born in Chicago on January 4, 1926, and was the son of Russian born orchestra musician and pianist, Maxim Olefsky, who was credited as an early influence. The young Paul began his early cello studies in Chicago with Johann Lingeman, first cello with the Chicago Civic Opera, and, at age seventeen, won a scholarship to the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music. There he briefly studied with the legendary cellist Emanuel Feuermann, then the equally legendary Gregor Piatagorsky, and also studied chamber music with the great violist William Primrose. Paul graduated in the class of 1947. He later furthered his studies in cello with Pablo Casals and in conducting with Herbert von Karajan at the Mozarteum in Salzburg. In 1948, two defining career highlights occurred, the first winning the famed Naumberg Competition and the second becoming the youngest ever Principal cellist in the history of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Under Eugene Ormandy, Paul appeared as a soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra many times and played at many illustrious venues, such as Carnegie Hall, the Lincoln Center, the Library of Congress, London’s Wigmore Hall, and Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw, to name but a few.

Celebrated for his rich tone, impeccable musicianship and commitment to the work of contemporary composers, a New York Times review from his 1948 debut delineated traits in Paul’s playing that would come to define his work over the entirety of his career, “Mr. Olefsky’s playing impressed by its musicality, sensitiveness and technical security, the most difficult passages of an extremely exacting program were surmounted with ease and precision.”

Leaving the orchestra in 1950 to serve as a petty officer in the navy during the Korean War, Paul made good use of his time by winning the Michaels Memorial Award Competition in 1953, and in so doing edged out a young pianist by the name of Van Cliburn. The next year, Olefsky was listed as Principal cello of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, a position he held for six years, all the while continuing his work performing as a soloist.

As with many great performers, giving back one’s own experiences to the younger generations ultimately drew Olefsky to a career in teaching, and so it was that successions of teaching positions loomed at institutions such as Juilliard, Peabody, and the Hartt School, before ultimately coming to The University of Texas at Austin where he taught for the best part of three decades.
He was quoted as saying of his pedagogy, “It is the obligation of the teacher to make the student independent of the teacher as soon as possible.” Many generations of young cellists have found their way to fine careers, including perhaps most touchingly, his wife, Hai Zheng Olefsky. Honoring his memory at the University, a former student established the Paul Olefsky Cello Scholarship, which received Board of Regents approval in 2012.

Paul is survived by his wife, Hai Zheng, their daughter, Maxine, and son, Michael.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Roger E. Myers (chair) and Glenn B. Richter

Distributed to the dean of the College of Fine Arts on April 18, 2014, and posted under “Memorials” at http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.