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HISTORY OF FAMILY TREE DNA and an AWARD FOR BENNETT GREENSPAN

I'm honored to present two Lifetime Achievement Awards today. Yes, there has been a conspiracy afoot. You have no idea how difficult it is to sneak onto a conference agenda. Thank you Janine Cloud. Additional co-conspirators are Katherine Borges, Nora Probasco and Linda Magellan, three people who have attended every conference since the beginning.



Left to right, Roberta Estes, Linda Magellan, Katherine Borges, Nora Probasco

Let's talk about the beginning.

Most everyone knows the story about Bennett Greenspan's first retirement in 1999.

Bennett tried to retire, but managed to get underfoot at home, and his wife in essence threw him out of the house. She told him she didn't much care WHAT he did, but he had to find SOMETHING to do, SOMEPLACE ELSE.

Now, knowing that Bennett is a genealogist, I'm betting that living in Houston, he went to the Clayton Library every day and assured his wife he was busy looking for a new career. He found it alright, or maybe it found him.

Someplace, at the Clayton Library or elsewhere, Bennett was thinking about how to prove that men with a common surname were or were not descended from a common ancestral line. Were they related? Bennett knew just enough about science to know that if he could find a way to test their Y chromosomes, and they descended from a common paternal ancestor, their Y DNA should match. Sometimes a little knowledge is a dangerous thing!

Bennett began a search to find a scientist that could and would run that one Y DNA test for him. As it turns out, could and would were two entirely different matters. Bennett found Dr. Michael Hammer at the University of Arizona who runs the [Hammer Lab that specializes in human evolutionary genetics](#).

Dr. Hammer could, but would he?

Bennett mentions talking to Dr. Hammer on the phone several times. Dr. Hammer mentions that Bennett camped out in his office and wouldn't leave. However persistent Bennett was or wasn't, in person or otherwise, we should all be incredibly grateful for his tenacity, because purely in self-defense, Dr. Hammer agreed to do the test – just that one test.

However, Dr. Hammer made a fateful throwaway comment as Bennett was on the way out the door. He said, "Someone should start a business doing this. You crazy genealogists ask me about this **ALL THE TIME.**"

Talk about what never to say to a bored entrepreneur. That "all the time" statement echoed and rolled around in Bennett's head. "All the time...all the time."

Now, I don't know exactly what happened next, but Bennett and Max were already business partners in another endeavor, and I'd bet the next conversation went something like this:

"Max – I've got an idea...."

Followed by a brief discussion and then:

"Bennett, are you crazy? No one will ever buy that?"

Like I said, I wasn't there – but I'm really glad Bennett was a bit crazy – because so are the rest of us genealogists – as is proven by the size and magnitude of the genetic genealogy industry today.

The fledgling business, [Family Tree DNA](#), was founded with Dr. Hammer's lab doing the testing.

Fast forward a few months to July 14, 2000.

Cousin Doug Mumma, who, by the way, I didn't know was a cousin until several years later thanks to a Family Finder test, called Family Tree DNA and talked to Bennett about Y DNA testing several Mumma men and men with similar surnames to see if they descended from a common ancestor. If Bennett was crazy wanting Y DNA testing, he is accompanied a whole lot of other genealogists. Perhaps it's genetic.

Bennett agreed to form a project for Doug and Doug agreed to commit to purchase 20 kits. Doug's first kit in the [Mumma Surname Project](#) was kit M-01 and by the time he was ready to purchase project kit number 21, the M was gone from the kit designation, and he purchased kit number 72.

Fast forward another few months.

I had tested my mitochondrial DNA with Oxford Ancestors and for something like \$900 discovered that I was the daughter of Jasmine, one of the seven daughters of Eve. I received a one page diagram with a gold star placed on the letter J. My fascination with the science of genetic genealogy had begun.

One of my cousins mentioned that some company in Texas was doing DNA testing on men for the Y chromosome for genealogy. I was just sure this was some kind of scam, because I figured if that could be done, Oxford Ancestors would be offering that too – and they weren't.

I found the phone number for Family Tree DNA, called and left a message.

Later that night, about 9:30, my phone rang and it was Bennett Greenspan returning my call – the President of Family Tree DNA.

Little did I know, at that time, that the office consisted of Bennett's cell phone.

We talked for an hour. I explained to Bennett that I had tested for mitochondrial DNA and asked about the Y DNA testing. Bennett described what Family Tree DNA was doing with testing and projects, convincing me it was not a scam after all. While I certainly understood the genetic basis of how Y DNA testing worked, I had not seen the website, or the software, and I was concerned about explaining how matching worked on the site between different men in a project.

Bennett said something fateful, which I'm sure he's regretting right about now. He said, "Don't worry – I'll help you." With that, I committed to purchase 5 kits and he committed to create the Estes surname project, and help me if I needed assistance. I quickly found 5 willing Estes genealogists who desperately wanted to know if they descended from a common Estes progenitor. The [Estes DNA project](#) was formed.

In mid-December 2002, I purchased kit 6656. Kits were selling at the incredible rate of about 2000 a year!

The DNA results were amazing and full of potential for every ancestral line. I quickly became an advocate of genetic genealogy, although Rootsweb wouldn't let us discuss DNA testing on the boards and lists, like it was some sort of pariah. DNA proved and disproved genealogy, myths and oral history – which bothered some folks immensely.

By 2004, genetic genealogy was growing and so was the interest in this field. Around the beginning of 2004, kit 17,000 was sold and twelve months later, on New Year's Eve, kit 30,244 was sold. Participation in genetic genealogy nearly doubled in 2004 and in two years, it had quadrupled. By now, kits were selling at just under 2000 per month.

November 2004 saw the first conference sponsored by Family Tree DNA in Houston which lasted only one day. The excitement in the community was palpable. Not only were we excited about the conference itself, and learning, but by meeting each other face to face.



Bennett Greenspan, Bruce Walsh (obscured by Bennett), Max Blankfeld and Matt Kaplan from the University of Arizona, at the first conference. Photos from 2004 courtesy ISOGG.

In April of 2005, [Family Tree DNA](#) made the announcement that they had teamed with the National Geographic Society and the [Genographic Project was launched](#). This liaison was the turning point that legitimized DNA testing to the rest of the world. People began to see DNA testing featured in the iconic magazine with the yellow cover and no one wondered anymore if we were just plain crazy.

In November 2005, the second Family Tree DNA Genetic Genealogy conference, which became the second annual conference, was held in Washington DC at the headquarters of the National Geographic Society.

This conference was extra exciting because of the location and the implications for genetic genealogy. We had come of age. The conference was held in the “Explorers Hall.” We were recognized as explorers too in this brave new genetic world.



My husband and I stayed at a hotel called The Helix in Washington, within walking distance to the National Geographic building. On the morning of the conference, we left the hotel for the 5-minute walk to Nat Geo. In front of us, maybe 30 feet, were Max and Bennett, briskly walking and chatting. We continued behind them, not wanting to interrupt. In those few minutes, I remember distinctly thinking that I was literally watching history being made by the two men in front of me. Little did I know exactly how true that was and what the future held.

On New Year’s Eve, 2005, I purchased kit 50,000. Of course, I had to purchase about 10 kits to manage to get kit 50,000, right at midnight. Unbeknownst to me, the Geographic Project had sold nearly 100,000 kits. Genetic genealogy had passed silently from its infancy.

Every year since then, more history has unfolded.

- Few people get the opportunity to shape the future.
- Few people get the opportunity to directly affect more than a few lives – in this case, millions.
- Few people get the opportunity to found not just a business, but an industry that will continue to provide information and answers long after we are nothing more than genealogical memories.
- Few people get to chart the course of history.

Yes, I’m talking about Max and Bennett.