



2024
NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY
DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI
COLLEGE OF ARTS
AND SCIENCES

DR. DON W. CLEVELAND '72



“Ability and perseverance comprise the secret sauce to success. NMSU graduates can compete and win—I am proof of this.”

—Dr. Don W. Cleveland '72

NMSU's 1972 valedictorian, Dr. Don W. Cleveland '72, earned his B.S. in physics from the College of Arts and Sciences. His father taught in the NMSU Department of Physics, and during Don's time at NMSU, he learned from departmental luminaries like Harold Daw and Horace Coburn. He obtained a Ph.D. in biomedical sciences from Princeton University, switching disciplines because he liked the fast pace of the research—despite never having taken a biology course.

Don's career has been one of field-leading discoveries about neurodegenerative diseases, particularly causes of and treatments for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and Huntington's diseases, chronic

traumatic brain injury, and spinal muscular atrophy (SMA). He led development of a gene silencing technology with “designer DNA drugs” that has led to effective treatments that slow and reverse fatal paralysis in ALS and SMA.

Don's groundbreaking research as a graduate student included the discovery of tau, the protein now recognized to play a pivotal role in cognitive disorders such as Alzheimer's. Of this early research, he says: “Incredibly, we got almost every detail right. I've learned that much of the work of science is a complex series of simple steps. If you get the steps in the right order, you make achievements.”

Today, Don chairs the University of California–San Diego Department of Cellular and Molecular Medicine. His research awards have included the \$3 million Breakthrough Prize in Life Sciences (2018) for identifying how an inherited form of ALS develops and developing drug therapy, the Howard Taylor Ricketts Prize from the University of Chicago (2012), the Sheila Essey Award for ALS research (2014), the Healey Center International Prize for ALS research (2020), and the Katharine Berkan Judd Award from Memorial Sloan-Kettering (2012). He was also named as the Wings Over Wall Street Outstanding Scientist (2007).

Don has served as president of the American Society for Cell Biology, and he has been elected to the National Academy of Sciences, National Academies Institute of Medicine, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He also served on the boards of the Novartis Neuroscience Scientific Advisory Board and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Scientific Review Board.

Don credits his success in large part to his wife, who enabled him to pursue a career that he loves. However, regardless of his own extraordinary contributions to science, Don says that his students will be his greatest legacy. “My students and postdocs will take this work forward. So far, I have supervised 68 postdocs, the overwhelming majority of whom are now world leaders in biomedical science.” Don's advice to NMSU students? “Don't undersell yourself and your NMSU education. The most important qualities that enable success are confidence in yourself and perseverance. With those, you can achieve at the highest level. Believe in yourself.” ▲