

*Special Section: In Honor of James Emmett Birren (1918-2016)*

## James E. Birren: A Unique Three Generational Perspective

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It was 1968 when Dr. Bernard C. Abbott, the newly appointed Director of the University of Southern California's Allan Hancock Foundation and Chair of Biological Sciences, first met Dr. James E. Birren, the Dean of the evolving Gerontology Center. As the design for the innovative building progressed, they, along with key faculty and staff, created the plans for the third floor biology research laboratory spaces. The multi-disciplinary nature of the field of Gerontology required faculty appointments jointly held between various disciplines and thus began an administrative relationship for budgets, salary negotiations, and research. Over the ensuing 20 years Bernard Abbott and James Birren became known as 'Bud' and 'Jim', serving on numerous university committees and enjoying an evolving comradery that extended beyond the campus confines. The late 1980's saw both men leave their roles in university administration to pursue other endeavors. Jim left for UCLA to take up his work on Guided Autobiography in earnest.

During the course of the 1970's, the role of the faculty wife was not to be ignored. Both Doris Abbott and Betty Birren worked together as members of the Faculty Wives Group and the campus-wide Town and Gown organization, to make available scholarships for students, and to represent USC in the Southern California Faculty Wives Association. This was the first Abbott generation interaction with Jim Birren and his stalwart partner, Betty. All are now gone, but their legacy lives on.

In 1976, Bernard's daughter Pauline entered USC to complete a degree in Psychology. Her interest was in counseling and she was guided to Jim Birren for some traditional academic advice. However, after a couple of meetings in which Jim asked a few of his 'blue sky' questions, gave his low key 'have you thought about' answers, and 'let me introduce you to...' suggestions, it became clear that Gerontology was not to be ignored. At Jim's behest, meeting Margaret Hartford, social worker extraordinaire and James Peterson Acting Director of the

School of Gerontology, set her out on a new and vibrant path. Following graduation, Pauline began an interesting career in teaching exercise and life skills courses to older adults and working in a senior nutrition program. However, the academic environment drew her back to campus and the world of the Andrus Center, where Jim introduced her to the newly appointed School Director, David Peterson. So began a twenty year career at the Center with the Davis School, the completion of further degrees, and the opportunity to become a professional colleague of the Birrens.

Always an innovator, during the early 1980's Jim and Betty Birren and a colleague established the California Council of Gerontology and Geriatrics (CCGG), a new statewide organization to bring together professionals in the field of aging. Teaching and research faculty from campuses in the statewide systems of the University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), private colleges and universities, and Community Colleges (CC) began to meet on a regular basis. In characteristic Jim Birren style, he encouraged the governance of the group to go forward with rotating officers, while he stayed regularly involved. Betty took on the role of volunteer Executive Director for several years in order to maintain the CCGG's financial integrity through membership. Jim encouraged Pauline's participation in the organization from the beginning; thus allowing her to expand her network, take on different leadership roles including President, and work with colleagues in CCGG to establish a University/Legislative Partnership that resulted in public hearings in Sacramento to further the message of Education on Aging from the Andrus Gerontology Center.

Although Jim's retirement from USC took him to UCLA, his work with Guided Autobiography (GAB) brought together many of his former students to continue to collaborate. Pauline again found herself working with Jim, although by this time she had become the Director of the California State University Fullerton Institute of Gerontology. As part of a small group facilitating yet another Birren innovation and Jim's authorship of the Birren Guided Autobiography Model, Pauline observed Jim as the consummate mentor, guide, and teacher. Pauline was always in awe of Jim's ability to think beyond the established parameters, identify a void and fill it with an appropriate action, and effect profoundly impactful outcomes.

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With the book written and methods tested, the Center for Guided Autobiography was established and given a temporary home at CSU Fullerton. Jim was appointed Senior Research Faculty, and GAB courses were offered for the first time in Orange County. It was during this time that Jim was recognized for his work at the American Society on Aging, with a unique day-long international forum on life history. Dr. Cheryl Svensson began the journey to develop a DVD of Jim leading the GAB session and transform the work into an online instrument. Again, Jim's innovation lives on through others.

Pauline formally retired in 2012 after a very rewarding, successful, and unexpected 35 year career in Gerontology with thanks in great part to Jim Birren—and she continues to work in the field on non-profit boards and in the community. This was the second generation of Abbotts to interact with the Birren legacy.

Pamela Abbott-Enz, daughter of Pauline and granddaughter of Bernard, grew up with the Birren name in the household. A member of her grandfather's cohort, Jim and Betty knew her and she saw them, with the eyes of a child, as a nice older couple. At sixteen, she had her first job as a summer student worker in the USC Gerontology Center working with Dr. Valerie Remnet in the Center's Extended Education office. As the office runner, Pam frequently interacted with Jim, and she was struck by his kind nature. During her freshman year on the USC campus, Pam would take breaks from practice with the Trojan Marching Band Flag Squad and visit the Gerontology Center. She enjoyed interacting with Jim as part of her regular routine. Little did anyone know that the seeds of Gerontology had been planted and just needed to be nurtured.

In 1990 Pam left to attend university in northern California where she met a member of the CCGG network (the organization started by Jim). Susan Hillier, Psychology Professor and Gerontology Program Coordinator, became her mentor as Pam pursued a gerontology certificate. When Pam applied to graduate school, Jim wrote a glowing letter of recommendation. When Pam married in 1993, Jim and Betty attended her wedding reception. She completed her Bachelor's and Master's degrees and established herself in the North Bay

area as an educator. In 2001, Pam was invited to join the Sonoma State gerontology program as a lecturer, and she helped edit the Hillier textbook. Her love for technology forged the way for her to become a sought after online gerontology instructor with roles at Sonoma State University, CSU East Bay, the SSU Gerontology Consortium, and American River College. When interacting with her students, Pam often shares how fortunate she feels to have been a "gerontology baby," growing up in the field and having had a chance to know pioneers like Jim. She also appreciates what a powerhouse Betty was, both as a professor's wife and in her work with CCGG.

In 2004 the American Society on Aging met in San Francisco, and both Pauline and Pam were presenting. They met Jim and Betty in the lobby of the hotel as they were heading to meet their son—a journey that would require them to use BART. They didn't think anything of taking the bus and train, luggage in tow, into Oakland at midnight, but Pam insisted that she would drive them. During an hour drive filled with wrong turns, laughter, and great conversation across the Bay Bridge, Pam forged a bond with Jim and Betty, allowing them to have a mutual laugh whenever they saw each other after that. No one knew that the hour in a car with Jim and Betty would turn out to be another pivotal moment in Pam's life.

In 2016 Pam began evaluating her interest in the connections among wisdom, spirituality, creativity, and aging. As she now pursues her Ph.D/D.Div. Pam is spending hours with Jim's academic work on wisdom and is excited to be participating in the guided autobiography program, creating new connections, and carrying on the legacy through networks that were established and nurtured by Jim. Pam is the third generation of the special Abbott/Birren interaction—a unique golden thread that has woven itself over nearly 50 years.

*We thank you Jim and Betty Birren for all the special people that you brought into our lives, the careers that you have helped develop, and the wisdom and insights you shared over your career that we now glean insights from in new and creative ways.*