

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

A Tribute to Jim Birren

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Jim Birren will always be remembered as a giant:

*A founder in establishing American gerontology.
A pioneer in the cognitive psychology of aging.
A builder of multidisciplinary research in aging.*

I will always remember him as a father figure:

*Who helped me begin my career.
Who mentored me.
Who influenced my 50 years of academic research.*

Jim Birren gave me my first job:

*He recruited me from the University of Chicago in
1967.
He helped me find our first apartment when I landed
at USC.
He and Betty gave my daughters their very first
Paddington Bear books.*

Jim Birren counseled me to obtain my first NIH grant:

*In 1969, to study families and intergenerational
relationship.
His advice on the design of the study was so wise.
That the study is remarkably still going on, 47 years
later (LSOG Wave-9, 2016).*

Jim Birren counseled me to buy USC season football tickets:

*In 1969, O.J. Simpson won the Heisman Trophy.
Today, our tickets are almost close to the 40 yard-line
after all these years (Almost).*

Jim Birren has influenced the lives of so many people, like myself, over the years. As I recall working with him, and the reactions of people who worked with him, I have come to feel there are four words that best describe his

impact. Jim was: Generative, Gracious, Generous—and, of course, he was a Genius.

First of all, Jim was *generative*. Many geniuses, many high achievers soar as their star moves upwards and then -poof! The blaze goes out. But Jim was a builder. He built institutions and organizations on foundations that endured. The Leonard Davis School of Gerontology at the University of Southern California has just celebrated its 50th year. The series of *Handbooks of Aging*—psychology, biology, and social sciences—which Birren began in 1960 are now in their eighth and ninth editions. Jim had organizational and administrative abilities that were far beyond those of most academicians and researchers. His ability to plan ahead, to see around the next corner, allowed him to be generative far into the future. And with his autobiographies and life review projects he was still intellectually generative well into the ninth decade of his life.

Secondly, Jim was *gracious*. He made you feel valued and that your opinion was important. And he listened. This helped him be generative. I remember him telling me how important “hallway administration” was. Hallway administration means that “You get out of your office and you walk down the hallway and you poke your head in people’s doors and you ask them how things are going for them.” Jim never seemed hurried, or at least not too hurried to listen to you. He wasn’t looking over your shoulder to search out someone more important to talk to. He remembered how many kids you had and how old they were. That seemed as important as how many papers you had published—especially for a junior researcher. And then there were the parties in Jim and Betty’s back yard. Jim and Betty were gracious hosts. And they always made you feel like you were the guest of honor.

Thirdly, Jim Birren was *generous*. He gave people credit and didn’t hog the limelight for himself. Most of his publications were co-authored and most were with students or junior scholars. He actively promoted the careers of his students and junior associates. Of course, this paid off, in loyalty and self-confidence from his junior colleagues. My first encounter with the Birren generosity came when I was still a graduate student at Chicago. I came out for a job interview at UC Berkeley and then down to USC. The two schools each gave me an offer, for the same amount of money, a magnificent \$9,500 (a year, not month). When Jim heard of the Berkeley offer, he impulsively upped the USC offer and pressed me to accept. So I became a Trojan, and not a Cal Bear, for an additional

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\$500--per year. This may be a somewhat trivial example (though it wasn't, for me—I bought a car for that \$500). But early on in my career I saw how Jim was generous to those around him, particularly to students, and how much of a multiplier this was—how this gave confidence and affirmation to all of those in Jim's orbit. I think this maxim is true of Jim's generous style of affirmation: *When you were working with Jim, you always did better than you thought you could do.*

Obviously, Jim Birren was a *genius*. The many of us who worked with him, both locally and abroad, quickly became aware of that. His observers saw him build a world-class research institute on aging at the corner of Exposition and Vermont out of a school that had a

reputation for football, and talk AARP into putting up a world-class research building to house it. We watched him get grant after grant from NIH, while putting out Handbook after Handbook on research on aging. We saw him lobby in Washington for the NIH and the AOA, while turning out cohort after cohort of talented students and publishing paper after paper that advanced our field. An endless line of successes—he was a genius, to be sure, and a fantastic juggler too.

This is the lasting personal memory I will always have about Jim Birren; when I was working with him, I always seemed to do better than when I was working alone. Jim Birren brought out the best in people, and that shows in his astonishingly long and productive career.