

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

A Message of Gratitude

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Like many colleagues, I first met Jim Birren when I was a lowly graduate student and he was the Director of the Andrus Gerontology Center at USC; and the person often referred to as “the father of gerontology.” At that time, Jim was known as a notable fundraiser, teacher, and administrator at USC and a nationally recognized researcher in psychology and aging. He also was an inspirational mentor to students and faculty alike.

Jim wasn’t ever my professor because I wasn’t a student at the Center, but I was fortunate to hang out with his students (and to be married to one of them, Paul Kerschner). It wasn’t until I graduated from USC that Jim became my long-time mentor in almost every stage of my professional life. Every time I asked for his suggestions and support, he responded with a generosity of time and talent, and the collegial collaboration of a peer. I knew we weren’t and never would be peers, but it was generous of him to treat me as one. Our collaborations always led to my knowing that I had received an incredible gift of his wealth of knowledge and the feeling that my experience would be something akin to having “15 minutes of fame.”

My professional career has included a number of positions and topics, all of which have included Jim’s input regarding aging. At Westinghouse Electric Company, Jim suggested that older women in developing countries might be the entry point for family education about contraceptives. At AAIA (an international association on aging), Jim worked with me on a research project that asked 100 leaders in aging from countries around the world to respond to the oft asked question, “How old is old?”. At the University of New Mexico, Jim assisted our Center on Aging in developing a plan for a university based retirement community for older adults. Of course, Jim really believed it should be a living and learning community for retired faculty. At the Beverly Foundation, Jim agreed to be on the Board of Directors and (perhaps reluctantly) to help design a research agenda in senior transportation. And, at the National Volunteer Transportation Center, Jim helped me develop the idea for telling stories about volunteer drivers and passengers.

It was Jim’s interest in story telling that resulted in a most profound contribution to my own story and the stories of countless others. Perhaps it also had an impact on many who have contributed articles for this publication.

In the late 1990’s I finally became Jim’s student. Not at USC, but at that other school across town, UCLA. Jim had suggested that I might enjoy taking (actually I think he suggested that I *should* take) the Guided Autobiography (GAB) class he was teaching at UCLA. The GAB process was (and is) a process for self-review (sometimes referred to as life review) that digs deep into the past and explores the future. In fact, one of Jim’s favorite expressions was Kierkegaard’s “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward”. One of my favorite “Jim expressions” was “You can’t know where you’re going until you know where you’ve been.” The GAB class was a life changing experience for me, just as it was (and still is) for so many others. In fact, after that class, I was one of the fortunate GAB graduates who became a member of a group often referred to (by us) as “Disciples of Jim”. Many in the group, especially Cheryl Svensson, collaborated with Jim in teaching GAB sessions and in continuing GAB as a James Birren legacy.

As time passed, Jim’s mentoring and teaching became collaboration in the design, development and communication of another way of looking at life today in order to plan for tomorrow. Jim called it “The Life Portfolio.” In truth, it had many of the elements of Guided Autobiography, but it emphasized telling one’s story about current activities and experiences with little or no emphasis on the past. Jim asked me to help him teach a couple of Life Portfolio classes at UCLA. Helping Jim teach a class was like a third grader helping Carl Sagan teach a course on astronomy. I observed, took notes, and cheered the class (and Jim) on. Over time, Jim and I refined the concept of Life Portfolio, and one of these days Cheryl and I may get around to creating a curriculum for use by those who want to explore new ways to live their life forward. However, what I learned from Jim in the GAB and Life Portfolio collaborations was the value of stories; and I became a believer in the need for each of us to tell our story.

Jim was particularly helpful in encouraging me to collect stories about real people, especially older adults, who provided and received transportation. It seems like the “dark ages” when we began collecting stories about volunteers who drive older adults because we collected them via mail. We discovered that just as themes related to

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one's past are of personal value, themes about transportation delivery by older adult volunteers could be captivating. The book, *Stories from the Road: Stories from the Heart* included ninety-eight stories written by volunteer drivers. Although we suggested a variety of themes, many of the writers told their story about the value and satisfaction of being a volunteer driver. The stories were uplifting and resulted in book which many organizations around the country have used as a model for collecting the stories of their volunteer drivers. The stories and the published book also resulted in a major corporation's interest in the personal mobility of older adults. When the leaders asked if they could be part of the volunteer transportation agenda you can imagine my response.

The second book, *The Stories of Passengers* had Jim's blessing but sadly not his involvement. The book currently is in the final stages of completion: it is different in the collection process, the suggested themes, the information collected and most importantly, the content of the stories. We asked the story tellers to tell us their age and many were in their 90s and some were 100+. We were surprised to discover that some in their 70s were caring for parents in their 90s and others in their 90s were caring for children in their 70s. It is probably a good thing that few of the passengers selected our suggested themes because the stories they told ran the gamut of issues in aging: losses of family and friends, health and mobility challenges, poverty and near poverty, isolation and loneliness, needs for

physical and emotional assistance, aging in place, and what one contributor called "something called a-g-e." On the specific topic of transportation, driving cessation, or what some called "giving up the keys," was identified in many of the stories and was viewed as a loss with negative social, economic, and financial implications. Added to that loss was their transition to becoming passengers, often difficult until they discovered a new method of getting where they needed to go. In most cases it was a volunteer driver program, a topic Jim spent considerable time helping me create new ideas for educational material.

Regardless of their health and social challenges, their losses and difficult transitions, a recurring theme expressed by these same passengers was that of gratitude...gratitude for new friendships and socialization, gratitude for physical and financial support, gratitude for random acts of kindness, gratitude for assistance and support and for getting a ride; and gratitude because strangers cared for them and about them. While the breadth and depth of challenges faced by these passengers should have been anticipated, the recurring theme of gratitude was a surprise. In embracing the positive social emotion of gratitude that modern psychology says can benefit the lives of religious and non-religious people, our passengers may be healthier than they realize. Their gratitude was an expression of psychological health that would make Jim proud. I expect that the soon to be published book of passenger stories with its dedication to Jim would also make him proud.