

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

Jim Birren: Visionary and Master Builder of Gerontology

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Unlike many contributors to this special journal issue about Jim Birren, I first met him and Betty very soon after their move to California in the fall of 1965. Their younger son and mine were close friends through junior high. Initially our relationship was social and had nothing to do with aging—other than our own! However, Jim was always proselytizing about aging as *the* wave of the future. So after several years of friendship built on shared interests in a wide range of ideas (including gardening) and my suffering a severe accident, Jim lured me into the world of aging as a grant writer for USC's gerontology program in 1971.

Jim's Early Years and Career in Government Research

What were some of the factors that led to Jim's renown in the field of aging? He was born on April 4, 1918 and grew up in Chicago in a family that included his four grandparents. Neither parent attended high school, but they valued education highly. Jim went to local public schools. In high school, he competed in varsity basketball and demonstrated an entrepreneurial bent; he and friends owned a successful gas station. He went to the local community college to become an engineer but then attended a teachers' college to pursue what seemed to be a more stable job prospect. He became interested in psychology and ultimately received a PhD in that discipline from Northwestern in 1947, where he met Betty who also got her master's degree in psychology in the same year.

He was successful in receiving a National Institute of Health predoctoral award that was not only important financially but also a major stepping-stone in his research career. He was engaged in a series of research activities at the Naval Medical Research Institute; the Baltimore City Hospital, home of a new research unit on aging; and the University of Chicago. Some of these activities delayed completion of his dissertation on *seasickness* (based on his

Navy research), but they became the foundation for his lifelong commitment to the study of aging.

At the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Jim led a multi-disciplinary team that conducted an evaluation of behavioral measures of 47 men age 65+ for a two-week period. An important finding was that older adults continue to acquire and store information but process it more slowly. Jim's subsequent research included neurophysiologists and physiologists whose perspectives became part of his own future inquiries. By the 1960s, he was responsible for both intramural and external research programs on aging at the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). Nathan Shock, David Solomon, and Robert Butler were collaborators who enhanced his research career then and in later years.

Jim was a pioneer in the field of aging. A major force in the history of the Gerontological Society of America (GSA), he attended its first meeting in 1948 and was one of its earliest presidents. His publications in the mid-1940s were centered on his dissertation research in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* and the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. In the late 1940s he began to publish articles in *The Gerontologist*. He also joined Robert Havighurst in initiating a 1955 American Psychological Association (APA) conference on the psychological aspects of aging, a precursor of APA's Division 20.

In his memoirs, Jim reported that he was getting restless in 1964, occasioned by a lack of promotion opportunities for non-physicians, salary issues, and concerns about costs of education for his three children. He also was particularly interested in linking the effects of children's health and experience into adult life, but that research approach unfortunately was not adopted by the NICHD, much to his chagrin.

Career Shift

For these several reasons, at age 47, Jim entertained a mid-life change when USC contacted him to develop a center on aging, with \$2 million pledged by a donor who wanted to build retirement housing. This was not an easy decision. The Birrens enjoyed their lives in their Maryland family home of 20 years and their nearby country farm for gardening and relaxation, and USC took its time in the negotiations. Ultimately USC President Topping, who had

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been at the NIH, ensured Jim's appointment as a tenured professor of psychology at an appropriate salary, with a guaranteed program budget for three years. Even before he arrived at USC, Jim was successful in securing a five-year NICHD biopsychosocial training grant for five assistant professors—one of whom was Vern Bengtson—15 doctoral students and travel funds. All was set for success and the Birren family moved—with some reluctance—to Los Angeles. Without this major career shift and Jim's intellectual attributes and personal characteristics, it is very probable the development of the field (and ultimately the discipline) of gerontology would have been very different. But the first few years in academia challenged Jim as both visionary and master builder.

The USC "culture" was very different from that of government research entities, with a focus on local community in the post-Watts riots era of 1965. A Board of Councilors comprised of advisors and prospective donors were standard for all major units, such as the new aging program. USC also was driven by its aspirations to become a top research university, so Jim had a "hunting license" to raise funds; a development officer was his only staff member. The emerging program had limited space in an old clapboard house on the main campus, and no research facilities were in place. But the biggest set-back was the donor's default due to problems with insurance issues, so the prospective Ross Cortese Institute became the Gerontology Center.

The program was subsequently moved to an industrial building off-campus consisting of a few offices and a lounge area on the ground floor used for seminars and for Friday afternoon social gatherings for all affiliated with the Center. Students occupied a series of open "cages" on the second floor. Jim recruited existing USC faculty on a part-time basis, and short-term visiting faculty were drawn from leaders in the field of aging. Classes and eventually some continuing education offerings were taught on the main campus. The Ph.D. students were expected to conduct research and to be advocates for and engage in community projects serving older adults.

The Center in the Early 1970s

Jim's greatest coup was his partnership with AARP in its search for a way to honor Ethel Percy Andrus. A decision was made in 1969 to fund a building for USC's gerontology program. By 1970, a national drive had raised two million dollars from individual AARP members. Foundations and local donors also contributed to the completion of the Andrus Gerontology Center on the main campus in 1972, seven years after Jim's arrival at USC. A three-story building, with a courtyard and basement vivarium, housed administrative offices, a library, auditorium, research facilities and office spaces for faculty from several disciplines as well as community outreach activities, seminar rooms, and student cubicles. It was dedicated in 1973.

This "new home" enabled Jim to recruit stars such as Caleb (Tuck) Finch and Warner Schaie. But he was also suddenly faced with a series of challenges as the leader of a new administrative unit required to interface with the university, identify new sources of funding, e.g. endowed chairs, and create new educational programs. As a lifelong learner, he hired faculty from different disciplines: economics, social work, public administration, dentistry, political science, architecture, urban planning, and education, in part to enhance his own knowledge, but mainly to incorporate multidisciplinary perspectives. They also had "hunting licenses" to raise resources for their own research; hold a joint appointment in an appropriate USC department/school and "gerontologize" their own discipline; be leaders in professional organizations; and be role models for the Ph.D. students—a challenge that was met with enthusiasm and passion—lots of midnight oil was burned! But it wasn't all work.

Thanks to Jim's *joie de vivre*, he focused on building a feeling of community and created opportunities for faculty, staff and students to socialize on a regular basis to enhance cross-disciplinary research, provide opportunities for exchanges to help shape the Center's future, and foster lifetime friendships. He also inaugurated the annual "Geronting Award" given to the person who had aged the most in the past year! These events not only took place at the Center but also at the Birrens' home. Their 4th of July parties in their beautiful garden—Jim's pride and joy—Thanksgiving dinners, Christmas celebrations, gatherings for visiting scholars, and weekend hiking were part of the Center's *esprit de corps*. All were urged by Betty to sign a guest book *every* time they enjoyed the hospitality at Toyopa Drive.

Jim also needed time for his own research and for teaching. Before he came to USC, he hadn't been heavily involved in teaching. He expected the doctoral students to teach *him* and expand his own research activity and interests. His seminars were provocative and spirited. He also found he really enjoyed teaching undergraduates, helping them shed light on their own aging process thus far and how it might affect their future lives.

And somehow he still found time to run the Center—aided by "gatekeeper" Eleanor James, faculty, and senior staff to dream up new programs. He presided over weekly senior staff meetings to exchange information about current activities and to generate plans for the future. One of his classic "leading" questions was "Who answers the phone for...?" That meant not just program responsibility, but also being the "guardian" for that area of intellectual development. He hired a USC Business School faculty member to strengthen staff management styles and provided opportunities for some annual weekend retreats at which discussions centered on what/how current programs might be improved and new ones planned. He also made sure that faculty attended annual Board of Councilors retreats to discuss their research and excite possible donor interest.

Key Innovations in the Field of Aging

Jim Birren's optimism, self-confidence and peripheral vision were key factors in his revolutionizing gerontology. He was competitive, welcomed challenges and was tolerant of ambiguity. As described in his memoirs, he also set great store by the roles of luck and timing in his career and the contributions of his mentors and colleagues. His analytical gifts led him to identify gaps in the field of aging research and education and convinced others to fill them.

This is not to say that everything was perfect. Jim had to deal with USC policies not always supportive of the Center, such as what unit was entitled to compete for individual donors, but he was successful in getting the Provost to convene a university-wide planning group to discuss the right "fit" for aging across the university. He also encountered politics that led to the loss of an NIA Center grant and having to adapt a National Science Foundation program to include interviewers with similar ethnic backgrounds as the individuals being studied. But the 1970s and 1980s were essentially a golden age for the Andrus Center.

Even before the move into the new building, Jim was well aware of the need to have a substantial library for the Center. A librarian was hired, current books and journals were catalogued, and she and Jim published an annual list of USA PhD dissertations on aging. The new library was accessible to students and faculty from all USC units, other local colleges and universities, and it was a mecca for practitioners and visitors from other USA and international institutions.

Unlike today when large numbers of commercial companies publish books on aging, there was a dearth of such activity then. In the mid-1970s, a Center Publications Office was created to publish faculty monographs, to feature their research and to inspire others. Another of Jim's "leading" questions was a perpetual guide: "What books or articles will be generated from this project?"

But that was only a beginning. With federal funding, Jim initiated a series of *handbooks on aging* in biology, sociology and psychology featuring the most current research; some are in their eighth edition. A subsequent handbook on mental health and aging, an encyclopedia and a book on *theories of aging* helped trigger an explosion in commercial publications and eventual demise of the Center's publications efforts. Like a good gardener, Jim weeded out that program when it no longer filled the need for which it had been created.

Jim then turned to the development of several educational programs. Probably the most famous was the *Summer Institute* of intensive courses taught by leaders in the field for graduate students and faculty from USC and other universities; junior faculty were often expected to teach about aging, without much background. New courses such as literature and aging and autobiography were offered. Besides learning about current research and enjoying southern California and social activities, attendees built networks and made lifelong friends. Jim

became quite famous for his energetic dancing in the courtyard. These institutes became a template for similar programs adapted subsequently by other universities and colleges.

A Masters Dual Degree, co-taught by faculty of the Schools of Public Administration and Social Work was funded by an Andrus Center grant. It was designed to train practitioners to be knowledgeable about interventions and policies on behalf of older adults. Trainees often worked in the Community Programs area to provide technical assistance, viz., in the Watts area to develop supports for older black residents, a non-profit housing company, and an experimental Medicare program called SCAN. Several graduates of this program eventually pursued their PhDs in social work and public health at USC and UCLA. Concurrently, other grants from NIMH and the Administration on aging expanded the Center's short-term training for practitioners, such as nurses, social workers, and "aging network" administrators and staff.

The year 1975 was a banner year for the field of aging; the National Institute on Aging (NIA) headed by Robert Butler, was established, as was the USC School of Gerontology, with Jim as its first dean. He understood that national and state government agencies, companies and foundations were becoming more aware of an aging society and its probable impacts on their policies and activities. In the fall, 55 students comprised the inaugural class; many were non-traditional students already in the field of aging but wanting to enhance their expertise.

The innovative curriculum of the Master of Science in Gerontology was evidence-based. It required an internship and either a comprehensive exam or a thesis for graduation. Its goal was to generate leaders of public and private programs for older adults, including corporations. This model heavily influenced how later gerontology programs were structured, often through USC's consistent engagement in the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE).

In 1976, AARP co-founder Leonard Davis, a friend and supporter of the Center since the late 1960s, established a generous endowment for the school that now bears his name, the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology. Under the guidance of David Peterson, the Director of the School, a continuing education department was expanded to provide professional certificates. Undergraduate classes for gerontology minors and majors also were designed and received general education status (no easy task), as were dual degree masters programs with other USC units (e.g., law, health administration, and business), requiring lengthy agreements from each of the two schools involved. Two master's degrees made Davis School graduates more attractive prospective employees, as was also true of the NIA doctoral and post-doctoral trainees. The School made it easier to hire new faculty without requiring up-front financial support from other USC units. However, joint appointments were still desirable for "gerontologizing" the rest of the university.

Two new programs drawing on the contributions of older adults were added in the 1970s to the School's

programs. USC's Emeriti Center, founded in 1978, was located in the Andrus Center building. It was primarily established as a research unit to study the needs and adjustments of retired faculty and staff. Jim viewed this program as a way to promote continued growth in their retirement years by continued participation in USC's social, cultural, athletic, and intellectual events, and to provide opportunities for joint retiree-student projects.

Another unique program, the Andrus Volunteers, comprising retired faculty and staff and older adults from the surrounding neighborhood, initiated intergenerational projects with gerontology students, such as book and white elephant sales, and writing and performing plays for the USC community and its neighbors. Today's Volunteers continue to assist the School in many ways: serving as research subjects and informal mentors and also helping students improve their interviewing skills.

During the late 1970s and the 1980s, Jim continued to create innovative programs in California, nationally and internationally. He and his co-visionary, Bonnie Russell of Cal State San Jose, secured a two-year grant to establish the California Council on Gerontology and Geriatrics (CCGG). Its purpose was to foster statewide communication among California's more than 250 two- and four-year public and private colleges and universities; promote a statewide plan of educational activities in aging; and provide information to policymakers about the need for an educated work force in California. Annual and two regional conferences featured opportunities for student presentations, and three newsletters were sent to members. Other grants provided some support, but Betty Birren became a voluntary Executive Director who expanded the membership and strengthened the organization's operations. Today CCGG is a forum for faculty and students about higher education in aging in the Golden State.

In 1981, perhaps inspired by a 1979-1980 sabbatical at Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Studies, Jim got funding to establish the Andrew Norman Institute for Advanced Study in Gerontology and Geriatrics. Fellows from the US and other nations (e.g., Canada, India, Japan, The Netherlands) spent 10 months at the Center, attended weekly seminars, pursued individual research and wrote chapters for four books on different topics: 1) Cognition, Stress and Aging; The Dementias: Policy and Management; Employment; and Education and Aging. The Institute emphasized the aging of societies via cross-cultural and multinational exchanges of information. Unlike similar "think tanks," Davis School and other USC faculty attended seminars, as did a select group of USC PhD students and distinguished faculty from other local universities. Jim believed this program was one of his most distinct contributions to the field and was particularly grateful for Hans Schroots' contributions. The careers of several authors in this journal were impacted by their participation as Fellows.

One outcome was that the Center was asked to help develop new programs in aging. For example, Jim helped a 1982-1983 Norman Institute Fellow, Dr. P.V. Ramamurti

in India, who was asking his Vice Chancellor to consider supporting an aging program in the psychology department. Jim's conversations with the administrator led to the creation of this new entity. That program is now India's leading academic program in aging, and my own Fulbrights have led to more than 20 years of collaboration. David Peterson played a similar role in Taiwan, and School faculty received awards to collaborate with colleagues in Europe, Latin America, and Australia.

Closer to home, was the UCLA/USC Long-term Care Gerontology Center that provided another opportunity for Jim and Dave Solomon to work together. Its purpose was to conduct research, education and service to aging populations, including veterans. Objectives were to develop a successful geriatric fellows program, expand training of a broad range of health professions, conduct a series of research seminars for UCLA and USC faculty, and initiate local community-based long-term care programs.

In the early 1980s, the School of Gerontology and USC's School of Medicine were successful in competing for two new programs. In 1983, the USC Geriatric Education Center (GEC) was one of the first four programs of its kind. Its tasks included faculty development, training practitioners and holding conferences in four states, creating and distributing educational materials, publishing newsletters about progress made, and assisting others to compete successfully for subsequent GEC programs. The second center was one of the first Alzheimer's Disease Centers. It included participation by UC Irvine, other USC health-related Schools, and Cal Tech. Research and education have been its primary tasks up to the present. It is now headquartered at the USC Health Sciences Campus and Rancho Los Amigos.

Jim's final major achievement in the field of aging was the creation of the PhD in Gerontology in 1989, his final year as dean. Several national leaders were not convinced that was an idea whose time had come, but in 1990 the University of Massachusetts, Boston followed suit and the die was cast. Research Institute and School faculty embraced the challenge, and both programs made joint presentations at various professional meetings to provide updates about their success. Since then, other PhD programs in gerontology/aging have been developed and have produced many of today's top researchers, educators, and policy makers.

But at age 71, Jim was not finished with institution building. Dave Solomon was looking for a director to organize the Borun Center for Gerontological Research at UCLA, and Jim looked forward to guiding the growth of a research program. The Borun Center was housed at the Veterans' Administration in west Los Angeles, but securing adequate funding was not easy and after Dave retired, the emphasis was less on active research and education and more on a fund raising and information exchange center. Not done yet, however, Jim and Betty expanded their attention to the area of autobiography that is amply described elsewhere in this journal.

After nearly 51 years of knowing and working with and for Jim Birren, I feel truly blessed and privileged, and know that I am not alone. Even now I keep in mind three of his “leading” questions: “Where do you see

yourself in five years?”; “What influences the choices you make?”; and “What new ideas have you adopted recently?”. His guidance and impact continue...