

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

James Birren – Mentor, Colleague, and Friend

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I first met James Birren when he was a visiting faculty member at West Virginia University in 1968. This was my first year as a doctoral student in Life-Span Developmental Psychology. There was a tradition of having a graduate student serve as host to visiting professors, and there was a reception in our apartment. My wife Ronni and I served as hosts, and it just so happened that my mother was visiting from Maine. She helped with the food, and Jim would ask me for a number of years if I could arrange for more of my mother's chopped liver.

In the summer of 1969, I was selected to participate in the Summer Graduate Student Program in Gerontology with students from all around the U.S. at the University of Southern California. There, I had Jim as one of my professors in a team taught course and had classes with Warner Schaie (who came from West Virginia to give the course), Larry Thompson, and Jasek Szafaran. Jim hosted a number of social events involving students and faculty where I further developed my relationship with him. This summer experience served as a foundation for my strong orientation to a multidisciplinary approach to gerontology and a desire to work with colleagues from different disciplines.

The 1972 West Virginia Life-Span Conference on Personality and Socialization was an important time of interaction. Jim and Diana Woodruff presented Human Development over the Life-Span through Education. The content of this chapter became a manifesto for my work with adult and older adult education.

At the 1981 White House Conference on Aging, I was appointed to the Research Committee. With the guidance of Jim and Robert Butler, I introduced the resolutions in support of NIA, NIMH and AOA. These resolutions were in support of important governmental units for funding in support of education, research, and community services and programs.

In 1981, Jim invited me to become a fellow of the Andrew Norman Institute for Advanced Study in

Gerontology. It was not until 1982 that I could arrange to spend a year at USC. I was invited to teach a Summer Graduate Course on Industrial Gerontology and later in the year I taught the graduate Psychology of Adulthood and Aging course. The 1982-83 year was devoted to Aging, Work and Health leading to the 1986 book. I did the chapter on Training Adult and Older Workers. Each week we would have guest speakers and a group meeting of Fellows. There were social get togethers, including events at the Birrens' home.

That same year I wrote with colleagues at Akron the chapter on Accidents and the Aging Individual for the 1985 Handbook on the Psychology of Aging. That same year I worked with Jim, Victor Renier, and Arnold Small as a committee to help organize the 1984 NATO Conference on Aging and Technology. This led to a chapter titled "Technology and the Aging Adult: Career Development and Training" for the book based on this conference. At my suggestion, Jim choose my aunt, Ida Russakoff Hoos, Sociologist on Technology, NASA Research Center at UC Berkley as the key note speaker for the conference.

It was also my pleasure to work for many years with Betty Birren on the Executive Committee of Division 20 Adult Development and Aging of the American Psychological Association. I would often spend time with Jim and Betty at the American Psychological Association, Gerontological Society of America, and the American Society on Aging conferences over many years.

My wife and I had a special time visiting with Jim at a conference on Aging and Fitness held in Yjvaskula, Finland. The next year, 1993 we organized a symposium on the Media and Aging involving Jim for the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics meeting in Budapest.

One of the real highlights for me of our relationship was having Jim and Betty come to Akron in 2001. Jim was the Keynote Speaker for a joint 25th Anniversary Event celebrating the Institute for Life-Span Development and Gerontology and the Ohio Association for Gerontology and Education. On this trip I was able to have them visit the Center for the History of American Psychology. The Birrens' photo and scrapbook albums are now part of the collection. It was our pleasure to host the Birrens in our home.

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Another great memory for my wife and me was having lunch in Pacific Palisades with Jim and Betty a month or so before they moved. It was great to spend time in Jim's study visiting and discussing their plans for the future.

When I became President of Division 20 for the second time, I received an email from Jim congratulating

me on my election. Later, there was a phone call.

This relationship came to a close when I was asked to write Jim's obituary for the American Psychologist. I asked Warner Schaie a long-time colleague of Jim and one of my mentors to join me in this tribute. As I stated at the beginning, Jim was a mentor, colleague, and friend.