

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

Jim Birren's Role in the Development of Educational Programs in Gerontology

Steven H. Zarit

The Pennsylvania State University

Jim Birren's contributions to the development of educational approaches and programs in Gerontology are often overlooked. Jim accepted the offer from the University of Southern California (USC) to lead a research institute, the Andrus Gerontology Center, but many of the efforts of the center soon focused on education, including an extensive summer program for faculty and students from across the globe and innovative doctoral programs that incorporated aging in the Departments of Psychology and Sociology. Most of all, Jim found himself thrust into the role of Dean of the new Leonard Davis School of Gerontology, which offered Certificates, Bachelor's degrees, Master's degrees and eventually Ph.D.s in Gerontology.

Jim played an important role in the success of those programs. He did not involve himself much in day-to-day activities that led to development and implementation of the new programs. He only gave an occasional lecture or taught the occasional graduate seminar, and he delegated curriculum development of the new school largely to Al Feldman, Ruth Weg, Paul Kerschner, and, subsequently, to the junior faculty who were hired in the school. Nonetheless, Jim made valuable contributions that were critical ultimately to the school's success.

First, Jim provided through his writings a strong theoretical foundation for the field. Beginning with his early chapter, "Principles of Research on Aging," which appeared in the 1959 *Handbook of Aging and the Individual*, Jim articulated a model that still guides the field today. He believed that aging should be studied from multiple disciplinary perspectives, sometimes working together and sometimes informing one another on new insights into the aging process. Jim was an eclectic and broad thinker. He looked for the best ideas, not just those which reinforced his ideas or derived from a particular discipline or methodology. He had big dreams and wanted research to go forward beyond what existed.

This breadth of vision, combined with the efforts of other faculty and researchers at Andrus and the Davis

School, helped build what a former faculty member, Mark Hayward, called the "Gerontological Imagination." It was a perspective shared by faculty and students that viewed both the problems and possibilities of later life. As reflected in his autobiographical studies, Jim always understood that older people were not just a problem or illness, but that they had things they could do well and contribute to their families and society. He also understood that aging involved losses, but that it would be possible to find ways to delay or compensate for these losses. The research at the Andrus Center and the educational content was optimistic—and included many pioneering studies of how to reduce or prevent problems in aging—such things as strength training (deVries, 1970), memory enhancement (e.g., Zarit, Gallagher, & Kramer, 1981), and so on. However, Jim never lost sight of the problems and threats to a good old age.

This perspective was attractive to students because it went beyond a listing of facts or research findings. They gained a larger vision that helped them understand the problems facing older people and the possibilities for enhancing later life. Students learned about the broader context of older people's lives and how factors ranging from ageism to health care to Social Security and other programs, affected older people. This training fostered a sense of social responsibility, in that the goal of our efforts was ultimately to improve the lives of older people through undertakings at both the individual level and through social change.

Jim communicated this combination of scientific understanding and optimism for applying science to solve problems of aging through his writings (e.g., Birren, 1974), his lectures, and his many informal conversations with students, faculty, and guests who came to the Center. Jim's articles began with a big picture of the issues. He could draw on a wide literature from multiple fields. And he didn't limit himself to what was published in the last 5 years, as is often the case now. It's a loss to the field that journals have imposed word limits that do not permit development of theory or more than a cursory examination of the ideas behind a study. It's also a loss that book chapters are devalued, because they are not peer reviewed in the same way as journal articles, and they are not available online. Yet it was in book chapters that Jim and the other major figures from his generation did some of

Steven H. Zarit, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor Emeritus, The Pennsylvania State University

Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Steven H. Zarit, Ph.D., E-mail: z67@psu.edu

their best work. Jim's chapters were integrative and always carried the field forward.

Jim's second contribution was his style of administration. His approach was to bring people together and let them work things out in their own way. He did not try to implant specific approaches or ideas. This created a lively and creative environment in the Andrus Center and Davis School. It could also be frustrating, because Jim was reluctant to step in to address problems of the inevitable conflict between strong personalities. In the end, however, the experiments in education proved successful.

Third, Jim gave credibility to Gerontology education through his leadership in the wider field. It was by no means certain that the Davis School would be successful. Much of the gerontological research field, which was then and still is now based in traditional academic departments, was skeptical and thought that things should go on as they always had; that is, that graduate students took a course or two on aging in their discipline and then did research in a lab that continued that discipline-focused training. Jim actively engaged people throughout the field to foster a sense of being gerontologists, which meant taking the big picture, looking at perspectives from multiple disciplines, and having a responsibility to address the important practical issues affecting older peoples' lives by training specialists in gerontology. He was the right person to make these arguments because he had an eminent career as a researcher and could therefore be persuasive about the need for this new applied field.

Jim loved getting together with scholars from dif-

ferent fields and talking about ideas. Instead of just focusing on the next project, he wanted to look ahead to where the field might go and how we could bring in new ideas, rather than just doing the same things over and over. He loved introducing new ideas and learning new perspectives from other disciplines as well as going outside gerontology altogether. For many people science is a means to an end, leading to fame and fortune. For Jim, science was the goal. Unlike the faster pace of things today, Jim wanted to take time to think, explore, and listen to ideas from other people.

In conclusion, Jim was a gentleman in an older sense of the word. He took time to talk and reflect with people. He made time for people. Moreover, he welcomed people from throughout the world to the Andrus Center and was instrumental in building gerontology as an international field. We should remember Jim for all these contributions.

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