

Introduction to the Special Issue: In Honor of James Emmett Birren (1918-2016)

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This special edition is dedicated to the life and work of James E. Birren. Dr. Birren was a pioneer in the field of aging, working in research in the 1940s, long before gerontology became an independent, academic discipline. In 1947 he worked with Nathan Shock in the inaugural gerontology research unit in the U.S. Public Health Service and studied differences between young and old subjects. He attended the first Gerontological Society of America meeting in 1948. At the National Institute of Mental Health he founded the first section on aging and in 1965 he left for the University of Southern California (USC) to set up the university's first gerontology program. He secured grants, raised funds, and built the Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center in 1973. Seeing the need for educational programs for those who would work with older adults, Jim created the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology in 1975 and became the inaugural dean until 1989.

Jim Birren was a prolific writer and published more than 250 articles on aging. He wrote the first *Psychology of Aging* textbook in 1964 and was the editor-in-chief for the well-known, three-volume, *Handbooks of Aging* series. He was also the first editor for the *Encyclopedia of Gerontology*. In addition to his many published articles that centered on speed of behavior and aging as well as theoretical issues, he has written three books on the topic of Guided Autobiography, his main focus and passion later in his career: *Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults*, (1991), *Where to Go From Here*, (1997), and *Telling the Stories of Life Through Guided Autobiography Groups*, (2001).

Jim acquired many awards and accolades during his long and illustrious career. He is a Past President of the Gerontological Society of America, the American Society on Aging, the California Council on Gerontology and Geriatrics, and the Division on Adult Development and Aging of the American Psychological Association. He was awarded the Brookdale Award for Gerontological Research, the Brookdale Distinguished Scholar, the

Gerontological Society award for Meritorious Research, the 1989 Sandoz Prize for Gerontological Research, the 2004 National Council on Aging, Ollie Randall Award and many more. He received honorary doctorates from the University of Göteborg, Sweden and St. Thomas University, New Brunswick, Canada.

For those of you who do not know of James Birren, these are just a few of the remarkable achievements from his 97+ years of life. These are the facts that are recorded and easily verifiable (Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Birren). But what are some of the less well-known aspects of Jim Birren's life and career? Who was he, really? How did others perceive him? What was his overall influence on the field of aging? What impact did he have on family, friends, students, and peers? In this special issue, you will learn of the many facets of Jim Birren's life. He was a researcher and academic who laid the groundwork for further studies in wisdom and personal narrative. He was on the cutting edge of gerontological research worldwide; he attended conferences and spread his wisdom around the world. He was a mentor and even father figure to researchers who today continue to carry on his work. Jim was someone who opened doors, welcomed newcomers to the field of aging and encouraged and even *pushed* them along in their careers. You will get an inside look at how the study of gerontology has grown to encompass Jim's vision of a multi-disciplinary field. You will glimpse the inner life of one of the 20th centuries' greatest luminaries. Through the words of those who have written about their time spent with Jim and his influence, you will gain an intimate view of his life.

It has been a privilege and honor to be asked to edit this special edition. In many ways, reading the enclosed articles has brought Jim to life once again. I would like to thank Tom Pierce, editor of this journal, for his decision to create a special edition dedicated to Jim Birren. Secondly, I wish to thank all the contributors to this special edition who wrote and shared their memories of time spent with Jim and his impact on gerontology. I also would like to acknowledge and thank Anita Woods for her help editing the submissions and insightful suggestions. Without all of you, this edition would never have occurred. It is now my pleasure to introduce you to James Emmett Birren—the man and the legend.

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