

## **MEMORIAL RESOLUTION**

### **J. MERRILL CARLSMITH (1936 – 1984)**

J. Merrill Carlsmith, Professor and Vice-Chairman of Psychology and Director of the Stanford Center for the Study of Youth Development, died of cancer on April 19, 1984 at the age of 48. He is survived by his wife Lyn, their three children Christopher, Kimberly, and Kevin, his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Carlsmith of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and two brothers, Roger and Allan.

Merrill's contacts with Stanford spanned four decades. As an undergraduate during the 50's, Merrill was involved in pioneering research with Leon Festinger, sparked by Festinger's seminal theory of cognitive dissonance. Six years later, Merrill returned to join the faculty. Always a superb methodologist, Merrill continued his work on dissonance theory, along with research in the areas of social compliance and non-verbal communication. In the ensuing years, Merrill served Stanford in a variety of roles. His courses, especially those in psychological statistics, were widely acclaimed and resulted in a Dean's Award for outstanding Teaching. From 1969 to 1972, Merrill served as a University Fellow, directing the Study of Graduate Education at Stanford. This involvement with graduate education continued with Merrill's service, from 1972 to 1975, as an Associate Dean of Graduate Studies -- a term ended by a year spent as a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. In 1979, he began his term as Vice-Chairman of the Department of Psychology. The following year, he was named Director of the Stanford Center for the Study of Youth Development, beginning a sustained involvement with interdisciplinary research on significant social problems involving youths. He was involved there, at the time of his death, in a major study of home versus foster care for abused and neglected children.

Merrill was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on April 12, 1936, and grew up in neighboring Baton Rouge. He attended Andover, where he made his mark in lacrosse, as well as in scholastic endeavors.

In 1954, Merrill entered Stanford, following a long family tradition. He sometimes noted that 35 members of his family had graduated from Stanford, starting with his four grandparents in the 1890's and continuing through to his son Chris, currently a student in the class of 1986.

At Stanford, Merrill chose, along with his cousin (and later collaborator) David Sears, to major in psychology. It was a time at which excitement ran high in social psychology -- a period in which Leon Festinger and his students were engaged in the development of his theory of cognitive dissonance that was to dominate the field for more than a decade. Merrill, as an undergraduate, joined Festinger's outstanding research group and, for his senior honors thesis, collaborated on a study with Festinger that became an overnight classic. This study won the 1958 Sigma Xi Award for Outstanding Student Research, and it remains, a quarter of a century later, one of the dozen most highly cited articles in this field. In that same year, Merrill was also elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

That fall, Merrill entered Harvard to pursue his Ph.D. He brought with him an honorary fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and a bill-paying fellowship from the National Science Foundation. At Harvard's Department of Social Relations, Merrill continued with his research on dissonance theory. In collaboration with Elliot Aronson, a former Stanford colleague, he produced a series of experiments that resulted in the formulation of new paradigms for research in this area.

It was also at Harvard that Merrill met Lyn Kuckenberg, a fellow graduate student in social relations and also a former Stanford student. They were married in Portland, Oregon in 1963.

After graduation, Merrill spent two years, 1962-1964, as an Assistant Professor at Yale. Here, through contact with Robert Abelson and others, he honed his skills in psychological statistics and the game of Go. Merrill frequently noted, with particular pride, his article with Abelson in a "Go journal."

In 1964, Merrill returned to Stanford, this time as a faculty member -- though appearing so youthful that he was routinely, to his delight, mistaken for an undergraduate. Over the next decade, he continued his research on dissonance theory and developed research programs on non-verbal communication and the determinants of social compliance. With Jon Freedman and Dave Sears, he also authored one of the most popular and readable texts in social psychology.

An exceptionally clear thinker and a superb methodologist, Merrill's work seemed a classic instance of the dictum that one should "seek simplicity, but distrust it." In his research, Merrill made maximal use of simple, and elegant, experimental techniques. During his year at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in 1975-1976, Merrill co-authored, with Elliot Aronson and Phoebe Ellsworth, the definitive book on research methods in this area.

A similar clarity of thought pervaded Merrill's teaching. In his first years here, Merrill's introductory psychology course with Tom Landauer was legendary for its tough-minded, yet enthusiastic, approach. Over the years, however, it was Merrill's courses in psychological statistics and his ability to communicate to students with little interest in, or an active aversion to, the topic that was most notable. He treasured the Dean's Award for Outstanding Teaching that he received in 1980 in recognition of these contributions.

In his statistics courses and as an informal statistical consultant to his colleagues in the Department of Psychology and the Youth Development Center, Merrill excelled because he taught much more than statistics. His real concern was how to think clearly about complex problems. In class, he would frequently illustrate ways in which reliance on complex statistical procedures often served as a substitute for, if not an obstruction to, thoughtful conceptual analysis. Many students (and colleagues) who sought his advice on apparently "statistical" matters found, to their surprise, that they left his office with a new, and more thoughtful, experimental design or a different perspective on an issue, rather than a more appropriate method of data analysis.

Over the last half of his career, Merrill also played an active role in university governance. In 1969, he was chosen as one of the initial group selected to pioneer the new University Fellows Program. From 1969-1972, he served as a University Fellow; and in 1971-

1972, he directed the influential Study of Graduate Education at Stanford. For the next three years, he served as an Associate Dean of Graduate Studies, under Lincoln Moses. Merrill was a perennial member of the Faculty Senate and served several terms on the Senate's Steering Committee. In 1979, he assumed the duties of Vice-Chairman of the Department of Psychology, a role he filled with great efficiency until his death.

In 1980, Merrill was appointed Director of the Stanford Center for the Study of Youth Development and became deeply involved in the intellectual life of this interdisciplinary enterprise. He collaborated on a series of research projects with colleagues from Sociology and Pediatrics, and was one of the principal investigators, along with Mike Wald and Herb Liederman, on a major study of the determinants of child custody decisions and the consequences of home versus foster care arrangements for children who had been abused or neglected.

There was much more to Merrill than the academician, however. He had a lasting fondness for the outdoor life -- whether hiking in the Sierras, river rafting, fishing, or simply gardening in the backyard. His perennial tan was the envy of many a colleague. He enjoyed most, it seemed, his relaxed summers at the family camp at Lake Winnepesaukee in New-Hampshire -- time spent with family and friends, fishing and boating.

Merrill loved competition. Whether at the bridge table, on the soccer field, across the Go Board, or at a backyard game of badminton, he was a tough and dedicated adversary. He played hard, but fair; and he loved to win. He was, in many senses, a classic "gentleman athlete," able to step into almost any sport with natural grace and coordination, but without ever taking the sport too seriously.

When proficiency did not come naturally, however, Merrill was not above hard work and persistence. On his early forays into skiing, slightly more accomplished companions could sense his palpable determination to master this new sport. And master it he did. Years later, he could point proudly to the NASTAR certificate he had won at Sugar Bowl.

Merrill took his competitive pursuits as intellectual challenges as well. He served for many seasons as a soccer coach for his children's teams in Portola Valley, becoming a credentialed CYSA coach and a master strategist. He enjoyed the challenges of both mental and physical conditioning. Not only did he succeed in producing winning teams, but, during one exciting summer, Merrill arranged to take his entire team abroad for a series of matches with young players across Europe.

Merrill is survived by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Carlsmith of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, his wife, Lyn, their children, Christopher, Kimberly, and Kevin and his brothers, Roger and Allan. Merrill died, as he had wished -- at home, at peace, in the company of his family. In the last year, he exhibited an enormous dignity and courage, helping those who cared about him at least as much as they were able to help him to cope with his illness. In Merrill's honor, the Dean of Humanities and Sciences has set aside funds for two annual prizes to be awarded to the best graduate and undergraduate research projects involving quantitative analysis. He will be sorely missed and long remembered.

Mark R. Lepper, Chair

Sanford M. Dornbusch  
Albert H. Hastorf  
Eleanor E. Maccoby