

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

WILLIAM L. RIVERS

(1925 - 1996)

William L. Rivers, Edwards Professor Emeritus of Communication, died May 26, 1996 at his sister's home in Jacksonville, Florida at age 71. His death ended a battle with kidney disease that had persisted through half a century of protean writing and inspired teaching. A professor at Stanford for 33 years, he formally retired in 1988 but had continued teaching one course each year until 1995.

Born in Gainesville, Florida, March 17, 1925, Bill Rivers grew up during the Great Depression and worked his way through school as a newspaper writer and reporter. Eventually he was to become America's most prolific author of textbooks for journalism and mass communication, and mentor to several generations of distinguished professionals and professors.

In World War II Rivers enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps out of high school, and saw action in the battle of Iwo Jima. Following his discharge in 1946 he entered Louisiana State University. While in college he worked full-time as a reporter and editorial writer for the State-Times, and also did some broadcast news work, in Baton Rouge. He took two degrees from LSU (B.A., 1951; M.A., 1952), then went to work as a reporter and columnist for the Panama City (Florida) News Herald. He returned to Baton Rouge to teach at LSU in 1953-54 while working full-time for the Morning Advocate. After a year as an American Political Science Association congressional fellow in Washington, D.C., he taught at the University of Miami in Florida 1955-58. Meanwhile, with support from various fellowships and part-time reporting jobs he began work on a Ph.D. in political science at American University. He spent a year teaching A.B.D. at the University of Texas in 1959-60.

When in 1960 he finished his dissertation, a study of press-government relations that focused on Washington correspondents, he became himself a Washington correspondent, writing for the public affairs magazine The Reporter. When that magazine ceased publication in 1961 he returned to Texas to teach for a year, as associate professor of journalism. He won a distinguished teaching award from the University of Texas in 1962, the year he was hired away by Stanford. He came here as associate professor of communication, temporarily giving up tenured status for two

years, but in the long run built a career as one of the most widely admired and beloved professors of journalism in the United States.

His dissertation built on Leo Rosten's classic 1937 study The Washington Correspondents. Rivers published his own analysis in 1965 as The Opinionmakers, a book that earned him the 1966 distinguished research award of Sigma Delta Chi, the national journalism society. In 1964 he published The Mass Media, one of the world's most widely used textbooks for introductory journalism courses for the next 20 years. These volumes marked the beginning of a long series of books, which had reached 29 at his death. Even in his last years at Stanford he carried with him a list of ten books in progress; many were to be revisions of earlier texts, mostly co-authored with his former students.

His publications included textbooks both for skills courses, such as Writing: Craft and Art (1975), Finding Facts (1975), and Broadcast Newswriting (1982), and for introductory lecture courses, such as Mass Media and Modern Society (1965; 1971), and The Media and The People (1978). He also produced scholarly volumes on government-press relationships, including The Adversaries (1972), Other Voices: The New Journalism in America (1974), Media and Government (1976), Regulating Mass Media (1982), Watching Contemporary Politics (1981), Responsibility in Mass Communication (1976; 1980), and The Other Government: Power and the Washington Media (1982). He headed up a program of studies of community newspapers' watchdog press councils, and was editor and principal author of Backtalk: Press Councils in America (1972). He published research articles in scholarly journals such as Public Opinion Quarterly, Journalism Quarterly, Journalism Educator, and the Columbia Journalism Review, and while a professor continued to write for general magazines such as the Saturday Review, the Reader's Digest, and The Progressive.

Rivers was much more than an ex-journalist educating students for careers in journalism. He created a Ph.D. program in public affairs communication that prepared experienced journalists for academic careers. Among the Rivers Ph.D.s, as they became known in the field, were several future heads of journalism programs at major universities including Dean Trevor Brown at Indiana University, Dean David Rubin at Syracuse University, and Dean William Slater at West Virginia University. His first Ph.D. student, William Blankenburg, recently retired after two decades as head of news-editorial journalism at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and one of his

research assistants, Edie Goldenberg, is currently completing her term as Dean of the School of Literature, Science, and Arts at the University of Michigan.

This dual role as teacher of reporters and mentor of professors gained him wide recognition in the field. In the late 1960s a nationwide survey asked journalism program administrators to name the best scholars in several instructional specialties. Rivers was the only professor chosen among the top few in two contrasting areas: print journalism, and mass communication theory. In the theory category, he ranked second only to Stanford's Wilbur Schramm, who had virtually created the field of mass communication during the 1950s. Stanford University conferred on him the Paul C. Edwards Professorship in 1971, and a Walter Gores faculty achievement award for excellence in teaching in 1975.

Excitement was a word students often used in describing a class with Rivers. Probably best remembered was the news writing lab to which he invited Carol Doda, famed in San Francisco's North Beach as the stripper who introduced silicone to that art form. Students paid rapt attention.

Clearly Rivers was a man who never felt comfortable with less than two jobs, and a dozen projects in progress, at any given time. Like many professors, he worked both days and nights, but Bill reversed the usual pattern. His habit was to stay at home writing during the morning and early afternoon, come to campus to teach classes in late afternoon, and then stay in his office until late at night. This pattern became even more firmly fixed after his wife Sara died in 1983.

This rigorous schedule could not be endured without a capacity for recreation and a sense of humor. Bill had both in exceptional measure. Before becoming severely debilitated by kidney deficiency in his late 40s, Rivers was fond of bowling at Tresidder Union, and he organized regular departmental volleyball and softball games. He usually played second base, a position that enabled him to make certain everyone was having a good time. Parties at his house mixed current students and faculty with dozens of his protégés who had become successful journalists in the Bay Area. One sure way to get invited to a Rivers gathering was to be an avid poker player; midway through the evening Bill could already be found in the den shuffling and dealing, and sometimes making extravagant bets before drawing four cards.

Bill and his wife Sara made careful plans for the welfare of their two daughters if he should die young, which practically everyone expected he would throughout the

1970s and 1980s. Instead, it was she who one day dropped dead of an unexpected heart attack. He was to live another two decades, but in progressively poorer health. After several years on a kidney dialysis machine, he became one of Stanford Hospital's first kidney transplant patients in 1970. When doctors warned him against playing volleyball, or even golf, he turned to indoor sports. His graduate students welcomed him home from the hospital with a pool table, but he soon moved it to the department lounge in Redwood Hall, where he delighted in playing against his students and faculty colleagues. Then, in the late 1970s with his system undermined by the years of physical problems, Rivers suffered a series of strokes that left him aphasic for a time and incapable of lecturing for the rest of his career. This did not, however, stop him from teaching.

Rivers students from all eras recall most saliently the detailed comments he wrote on their drafts of news stories and academic papers. By 1980 this was virtually his sole teaching method. Faced with diminished capacity for oral discourse but a mind that still knew how to coach writing, he limited his instruction to courses in news reporting and magazine writing. His students would produce their drafts, which he and the other students then criticized in class. He began each course by distributing to the students an explanation of his health history, and of how class sessions would be run. Few left when they heard this news, and none complained about the quality of teaching. In fact, course evaluations by students remained at or above the departmental norm in the writing courses Rivers taught throughout his last 15 years at Stanford.

When he took formal retirement at age 63, it was not to stop teaching entirely but to spend one-fourth of the year teaching and three-fourths of it writing, rather than the other way around. He would arrive each afternoon to put in his swing-shift office hours, sustained by endless cases of diet Pepsi. Everyone knew where to find him, and no one ever had to wait long for feedback on an article or book manuscript. Rivers was a meticulous and thoughtful copy reader, no matter what kind of material others put in front of him. He continued to produce skilled and satisfied students until at age 70 he retired fully and moved back to Florida, to join the sister who had a quarter-century before donated a kidney to him. He died less than a year later.

He leaves behind, with more than a thousand former students, mimeograph copies of such tips as "Rivers' First (and Only) Law: Typographical errors are worse than errors of ignorance. The ignorant can be taught. The careless never learn. Moral: Be careful."

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