In Memoriam: Donald W. Carson

School of Journalism
February 2018

Donald W. Carson, a revered professor in the UA journalism program and one of the early leaders in helping diversify the nation's newsrooms, died in Tucson on Feb. 1. He was 85.


The professor emeritus is among the inaugural members to be inducted into the UA School of Journalism Hall of Fame on April 7. Carson previously was inducted into the Arizona Newspaper Association Hall of Fame and the Arizona Daily Wildcat Hall of Fame.

"Professor Carson was a true gift in my life, as a professor, mentor and friend," said Gabrielle Fimbres, a graduate of the journalism school and a former Tucson Citizen reporter and editor. "Don inspired us to be curious, tenacious, creative, hard-working and as perfect in our work as possible."

"When you are writing stories that have the power to impact lives, there is little room for error. Don's impact as a journalist, educator and incredible mentor lives on in the work of generations of students and professionals," added Fimbres, who is a senior manager in communications for Ventana Medical Systems.

Carson also coached newspaper reporters on their news reporting, evaluated nonfiction works for the University of Arizona Press and co-authored a biography of U.S. Rep. Morris K. Udall with fellow Professor Emeritus Jim Johnson.

In 1980, Carson helped launched the Editing Program for Minority Journalists at the UA with Frank Sotomayor, a 1966 graduate of the school. The summer program, sponsored by the Robert C. Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, trained hundreds of minority editors from across the country, using UA students as reporters.

For nearly 20 years, Carson also drove UA minority journalism students to the California Chicano News Media Association's annual job opportunities conference in Los Angeles. In 1995, he received a plaque from the association that read: "Professor Don Carson, University of Arizona. You have gone the extra mile for diversity. We need more people like you. Gracias." Many former students obtained their first summer jobs through the conference.

Carson, a three-time Fulbright professor, was honored for his diversity efforts by the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the National Conference of Editorial Writers and the Institute for Journalism Education. He also was active in Concerned Media Professionals, a nonprofit organization that aimed to increase diversity in Tucson newsrooms and provided
scholarships to minority students in the UA journalism program.

He helped stave off the elimination of the journalism program in the mid-1990s and was selected to receive the Western Newspaper Foundation's first Outstanding Journalism Educator Award. He was a Fulbright Scholar in Ecuador and lectured in seven other countries around the globe.

Sotomayor praised Carson for taking a leading role in fighting the 1994 plan to eliminate the journalism program in a cost-saving move.

"Don had a large group of ex-students and friends who loved him and whom he energized to successfully stave off elimination of the journalism program, which has thrived since then," said Sotomayor, chair of the school's advisory council.

Professor Emeritus George Ridge, a former two-time director of the school, observed Carson's dedication to teaching for more than three decades. Carson taught from 1966 to 1967, and spent one year as an editorial writer at the Star, before rejoining the faculty in 1968, when Ridge came aboard.

"Don may not have invented face-to-face grading, but he certainly took it to new heights," Ridge said. "I remember a chat with him about how students who received written criticism and an 'automatic E' on (incorrect or incomplete) names? Don was a stickler for the middle initial? would turn in disgust and toss the story aside. But face-to-face, they had to take notes? and that seemed to stick."

Carson's wife, Helen, died in 2016. The two were married for 61 years.

Carson is survived by daughter Theresa Fortney, who lives in Virginia with her husband, Robert; son Mike Carson, who lives with his wife, Leah, in Phoenix; daughter Susan Cormier, who lives in Colorado with her husband, Craig; and five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held Feb. 23, at 11 a.m. at St. Odilia Parish, 7570 N. Paseo Del Norte, with a celebration of life at 1 p.m. at Hacienda del Sol, 5501 N. Hacienda Del Sol Road. Donations in Carson's name can be sent to: Casa Maria Catholic Worker Community, the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, Interfaith Community Services, Habitat for Humanity Tucson, the Concerned Media Professionals Scholarship Endowment and the Don Carson Journalism Fund [1].

(A version of this article originally appeared on the UA School of Journalism website.)

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[1] https://journalism.arizona.edu/annual-scholarships