In Memoriam: Richard Ruiz and Walter H. Birkby

February 2015

Richard Ruiz

Richard Ruiz, a beloved University of Arizona faculty member and mentor and head of the Department of Mexican American Studies in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, died unexpectedly on Friday. He was 65.

In addition to serving as department head for Mexican American studies, Ruiz was a professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning & Sociocultural Studies in the College of Education, with faculty affiliations in the Interdisciplinary Graduate Program in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching and the Program on Comparative Cultural and Literary Studies.

He was an Honors College professor and a Faculty Fellow and faculty adviser to the UA’s Chicano/Hispanic Student Affairs, holding weekly office hours to talk to students.

He is remembered by his UA colleagues for his passion, thoughtfulness and sense of humor.

"Richard Ruiz was a remarkable person. Small in stature and quiet of voice, he was a productive and accomplished scholar; a committed and generous citizen of the academy and the world; and a teacher of uncommon ability and an ethical, honorable and kind member of our community," said Ronald Marx, dean of the UA College of Education.

"But beyond all of these important qualities, Richard had a way of combining all of these into a package that somehow was even more. He had a special quality that served to empower others, calm troubled waters and make everyone in his presence feel special and important. In a college and a University with many, many special people, Richard stood above them all."

Ruiz joined the UA faculty in 1986. Before being named head of the UA’s Department of Mexican American Studies in 2012, he served as head of the Department of Language, Reading and Culture in the UA College of Education from 1993 to 1999 and as interim head of the Department of Teaching and Teacher Education from 2003 to 2007. Those two departments eventually merged to form the Department of Teaching, Learning & Sociocultural Studies.
"In 2012, Richard Ruiz selflessly came to the aid of the Department of Mexican American Studies," said John Paul Jones, dean of the UA College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. "He did so during a time in his career where many faculty might have been satisfied to simply plan their retirement. He quickly earned the respect of the faculty, staff and students in the department. Richard was a calm, wise and effective leader with an open-door policy for everyone. He loved students and gave his time generously to their success. His warmth and good nature affected everyone who met him. Everyone in SBS will miss him greatly."

Ruiz was recognized internationally for his research and scholarship in language planning and policy development and was a consultant to the governments of Mexico, Australia, Guatemala, Bolivia, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Netherlands Antilles (Aruba and Curaçao), Israel, South Africa, and native communities in the United States and Canada. In 1992, he was recognized for his expertise in educational policy studies when he was named to the Clinton-Gore Education Transition Team.

In 2000, Ruiz was selected as a Distinguished Visiting Professor by the Mexican Academy of Science, and in 2001 he was appointed director of social justice for the American Educational Research Association, or AERA. In 2004, he received the Maria Urquides Laureate Award in the College of Education for his outstanding service to bilingual children.


He was involved with numerous committees and boards throughout his career. He served as chair of AERA's Standing Committee on Social Justice and as a member of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards' English as a New Language Standards Committee; AERA's Minorities, Governance and Special Interest Group Task Forces; and the Multicultural Education Committee of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, to name a few.

Prior to joining the UA, Ruiz received degrees in French literature at Harvard College and in anthropology and philosophy of education at Stanford University. He taught educational policy studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison for nine years.

Ruiz touched many lives during his time at the UA, and those who worked closely with him say his impact will be long remembered.

"Richard will always be remembered by his quirky and always hilarious sense of humor. But of course he will also be remembered for so many other things: for his passion for social justice and for being on the right side of the struggles for human and civil rights," said colleague Alberto Arenas, associate professor in the College of Education. "For his devotion to the University of Arizona, and always stepping up to the plate when the UA needed him ? in the College of Education, Mexican American Studies and elsewhere. For expanding our intellectual horizons and for inspiring us to be better each day. For his commitment to students, which was indefatigable. He was an extremely popular professor and mentor who attracted undergraduate and graduate students from many walks of life."

"Richard was a dear colleague and human being, in so many ways the best of what a professor and department head can be," said Gary Rhoades, head of the UA Department of Educational Policy Studies and Practice
"A lovely combination of gentle and fierce, of uber smart and incredibly well-read? and very down to earth with a direct, simple wisdom. A wonderful, understated wit, with a quintessential chuckle that I will continue to treasure as it echoes in my mind."

Ruiz is survived by his wife, Marie, and two sons.

An altar has been established in Ruiz's memory on the second floor of the Cesar E. Chavez Building on the UA campus, and students, friends and colleagues are invited to bring pictures or to leave items or messages in remembrance.

Walter H. Birkby, a nationally known forensic anthropologist who worked as Pima County's forensic anthropologist for more than 40 years and who built the Arizona State Museum's Human Identification Laboratory at the UA, died on Jan. 31. He was 83.

A Korean War veteran, Birkby earned a doctorate in anthropology at the UA and built the Arizona State Museum's Human Identification Laboratory. Birkby and his lab quickly became an indispensable resource for both archaeologists and police investigators looking for clues in the skeletal remains of the dead. The demand for his expertise had him traveling around the country, sometimes around the world, to work at archaeological sites or appear as an expert witness in murder trials.

Before retiring from the county in 2009, Pima County officials named the forensic lab in the Pima County Medical Examiner's office the Walter H. Birkby Forensic Anthropology Laboratory. Birkby testified as an expert witness at dozens of murder trials, identifying the remains of murder victims or, in more recent years, those of migrants found crossing the southern Arizona desert.

Birkby came to the UA in 1963 as a graduate student. He stayed for his doctorate and went on to work as a physical anthropologist at the Arizona State Museum from 1968-1985 and as the museum's curator of physical anthropology from 1985-1996. Birkby also taught numerous courses on forensic anthropology and drew a dedicated following of students,
including Bruce Anderson, Pima County's current forensic anthropologist and a UA adjunct assistant professor of anthropology.

"He was the most genuine, kind, knowledgeable man I ever met," Anderson said. "He was a preeminent forensic anthropologist for almost 50 years who instilled in his graduate students a sense of doing the right thing."

Anderson remembered Birkby as a punctual Marine who was in the lab at 7 every morning to make the coffee but who never left before 5 p.m. Except Fridays.

"He thought it was important to socialize with students," said Anderson, recalling many Friday afternoon gatherings at The Shanty, a Tucson tavern. "He thought it was important to knock off an hour early to discuss things with his peers and his students."

David Soren, UA Regents' Professor of Anthropology and Classics, worked with Birkby on overseas archaeological excavations as well as national and international film projects, books and articles.

"Walt was full of fun and stories, particularly of his Marine days," Soren said. "He sometimes would try to shock and provoke people, always with good humor, but on the excavations he was someone that people chose to confide in when they had personal problems. I found that his reputation of shocking and teasing was a surface part of him but the real man was incredibly dedicated to his field and thoroughly professional, kind and sweet. He was a rock solid and indispensable member of our team and a terrific mentor to his protégés."

Birkby's legacy continues through the Arizona State Museum's collections and the students he trained, said James Watson, head of research at the Arizona State Museum.

"Most of the human remains that the Arizona State Museum holds in its collections were accessioned or examined by Birkby," Watson said. "He also trained generations of students. Much of his influence can be directly seen in the impact of his forensic anthropology students that work in the field and publish today."

Pima County Medical Examiner Gregory Hess appreciates the contributions Birkby made to the field of forensic anthropology. "Certainly, he'll be missed. He was one of the pioneers in forensic anthropology."

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