



Robert A. Beck

November 1, 1920 – July 31, 2012

Dean Emeritus Robert A. Beck '42 died July 31, 2012, at the age of 91. He was one of the most beloved figures in the history of Cornell's School of Hotel Administration (SHA). His innovative emphasis on research, coupled with his passion for customer service, distinguished his service as dean from 1961 to 1981.

According to both current and former faculty members, Dean Beck had a profound impact on those he came into contact with during his time as dean. "He had personally—and he instilled in the school—a high level of expectation of excellence," said Professor Emeritus Neal Geller '64, hotel administration, who was named the first Robert A. Beck Professor of Hospitality Financial Management. "It made me really proud to be the first Robert A. Beck professor."

Dean Beck was born November 1, 1920, grew up in Milton, Massachusetts, and spent many summers in Cape Cod, where he first met founding dean H. B. Meek, whom he would succeed as dean of the SHA. Dean Beck was the youngest member of the faculty when President Deane Malott appointed him to succeed Dean Meek. To Dean Beck fell the task of filling the shoes of a legend, and he did it by becoming a legend in his own right. He hired formally trained academics in place of the operational practitioners of Meek's era. He emphasized research and raised the school's international profile. He recognized early on the potential of the coming information age, introducing computing to the school's curriculum.

"He took a technical and managerial approach to hotel management. He had a strong belief in that. There were five of us on the faculty who were Cornell engineers, and he liked engineers for the way we thought and the way we talked," said Professor Emeritus Richard Moore '67, hotel administration, whom Dean Beck hired.

In 1973, he founded the Master of Professional Studies program, which later became the Master of Management in Hospitality, and launched the school's executive education program. During Dean Beck's tenure, undergraduate enrollment in the school doubled. According to current SHA

Dean Michael D. Johnson, under Beck's direction, the school increased female involvement in hospitality at a time when the field was dominated by males.

Dean Beck expanded the scope of the school's curriculum to give students both an interdisciplinary and international research focus. He established partnerships in Latin America and an alliance with ESSEC Business School's Institut de Management Hotelier International (IMHI) in **Cergy-Pontoise Cedex**, France. Dean Beck also sent several Cornell professors to teach at IMHI.

During the social upheavals of the Vietnam era, Dean Beck remained a firm, guiding presence, insisting on proper dress and decorum and keeping the focus on the work at hand. Despite his numerous projects, both at Cornell and abroad, he was known for spending much of his time interacting with the students. He was present in the hallway during class changes. He met with students every morning for coffee, answering questions and probing their opinions. His genuine concern for their well-being was evident despite his commanding demeanor.

Dean Beck drew upon a profound well of character that was deepened by wartime experience. World War II began during his senior year at Cornell, and he entered the army after graduation. He took part in the D-Day invasion of Normandy as a member of the 90th Infantry Division, United States Army; only eleven men in his unit of 185 survived the drive up Utah Beach. A week later, his unit came under fire from a German tank. He alone survived, losing a leg to his injuries. He spent the next eleven months in the hospital, blind for the first three of them.

Jan Murray, who would marry Bob the next year and spend many years caring for SHA students while raising their three daughters, was at his side throughout his recovery, urging him onto his feet and back into life. They returned to his native Boston, where Bob developed an interest in labor relations while working at Quincy Market; in 1951 he returned to Cornell for graduate study, earning a master's degree in education in 1952 and a doctorate in psychology in 1954. That was the same year he joined the SHA faculty, teaching labor relations to hotel students and accounting to students in Home Economics and the School of Industrial and Labor Relations. He was awarded tenure in 1957, promoted to full professor in 1960, and appointed dean one year later.

Dean Johnson said that he will most remember Dean Beck for his charming demeanor and his humor, which endured into his old age. Dean Johnson recounted a time in Florida when he, Dean Beck, and some alumni were meeting over lunch. "While we were eating lunch, he saw two 78-year-old ladies dining by themselves. Dean Beck, at 89 and with all of his charm, went with his walker and made a beeline for these two ladies and asked, 'What are two beautiful ladies like you doing all alone?' He made their day. He just had a charm that would light up a room. I grew very fond of Bob, and I will cherish the time spent with this remarkable member of our community."

Dean Beck and his beloved Jan, who died in 1999, were honored in 2004 with the dedication of the Robert A. and Jan M. Beck Center, a sunny space that hums continually with the comings, goings, and gatherings of Hotelies and visitors. The Beck Center is a beautiful and fitting tribute to both of them. Dean Beck's legacy at Cornell continues in the form of the Robert A. Beck '42

Scholarship Fund, which was founded in his honor in 1984 to provide scholarships to undergraduates in the School of Hotel Administration.

Dean Beck's loss will be deeply felt by all alumni, faculty, and staff who had the great fortune to experience his leadership. Many more will cherish his memory, including those who had an opportunity to meet or reconnect with him at the 2012 Cornell Hospitality Icon & Innovator Awards gala in New York City. Even at that highly charged event, Dean Beck's warm charisma and joyous sense of humor were an irresistible draw.

Dean Beck is survived by three daughters, Susan Warner, Robin MacRae, and Janyce Beck, A&S '70; sons-in-law Dr. Mark M. Warner '69 and Dr. Roderick MacRae; seven grandchildren: Carla Petzold-Beck '95, Kathrin Petzold, A&S '01, Robert Petzold, Mark M. Warner, Jr. (Maria), Amy O'Donnell (Joseph), Rory MacRae (Patricia), and Alexander MacRae; and seven great-grandchildren.

Composed from information written by Dean Michael D. Johnson, Dean and E.M. Statler Professor, School of Hotel Administration, Cornell University, an obituary published in The Cornell Daily Sun newspaper, and consultation with former Dean and Professor Emeritus John J. Clark, Jr.