

Benjamin Nichols

September 20, 1920 — November 24, 2007

Benjamin Nichols was born in Staten Island, New York and died of complications of lymphoma and leukemia at age 87 in Ithaca. He was a member of the faculty of the School of Electrical and Computer Engineering for 42 years and a former Mayor of Ithaca (1989-95).

Ben's association with Cornell began in 1937 when he entered as a freshman in the School of Electrical Engineering (now Electrical and Computer Engineering). In 1941, he enlisted in the U.S. Army soon after Pearl Harbor. After nearly four years of service, he returned to Cornell in 1945 and obtained his B.S.E.E. degree in 1946. He began graduate studies in Electrical Engineering at Cornell the same year and held the rank of Instructor for three years. After receiving the M.S.E.E. degree, he became an Assistant Professor in 1949. During the 1951-52 academic year, he was a Faculty Fellow of the Ford Foundation Fund for the Advancement of Education, an interest that he would resume in later years.

At about the same time, he began research at Cornell in collaboration with Professor Henry Booker on radio-wave studies of the ionosphere. At the time of his promotion to Associate Professor in 1953, he was in charge of the radio and communications division in the School. During a sabbatical leave of absence in 1955-56, he was a Research Associate at the Geophysical Institute of the University of Alaska, where he studied radar echoes from the aurora, and received the Ph.D. degree in Geophysics from that institution in 1957. He was promoted to full Professor at Cornell in 1959. He served as a U.S. delegate to the 11th and 12th International Assemblies of the International Union of Radio Science and also was Cornell's representative at the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research. During this period, he wrote or co-authored several papers and reports on Cornell's ionosphere research program.

In 1963, Ben discontinued radio-wave research because of its military applications and military support, and shifted his interest to science education. In 1964-65, he spent a sabbatical leave with Education Services, Inc. in Watertown, Massachusetts as director of an elementary science study whose goal was to develop textbooks with a new approach to education in mathematics and science at the grade-school level. Upon his return to the campus, Ben entered a four-year period of university-wide activity, first as Acting Director of the Center for Research in Education, followed by a period as Director of the Office of Teacher Preparation, and finally as Director of the Human Affairs Program. He was also a member of the Faculty Council before the creation of the

Faculty Council of Representatives, and he served on several committees of the University Faculty, including chairing the Committees on the Economic Status of the Faculty, on Minority Education (he was deeply involved in the development of the Black-Studies Program) and on Admissions and Financial Aid, and as Director of the Upward Bound Program. During the existence of the first University Senate, he served as chair of its Executive Committee and later as Speaker. He took part in several special commissions, including the original Committee on Special Education Projects (COSEP) and the Commission on Financial Aid. He chaired the Cornell section of the Association of University Professors (AAUP) during the Willard Straight Hall takeover in the spring of 1969 and was instrumental in resolving the crisis.

In the College of Engineering, Professor Nichols served as chair of the Policy Committee and the Common Curriculum Governing Board. In 1980, he was appointed Assistant Dean of the Engineering College Division of Basic Studies and held that position for two years, during which time he was a member of the committee that outlined the core curriculum for the College.

At the School level, Ben concentrated his efforts on undergraduate teaching, particularly on development and improvement of the basic electrical science and electrical engineering courses. He held the position of Assistant Director for Undergraduate Studies and subsequently was a member of many committees in the School that were concerned with curricular changes and school policies. He served as the School's Graduate Field Representative in the academic year 1968-69, and was the Associate Director of the School from 1985 until his retirement in 1988. He was a member of several professional societies.

Along with these administrative duties in the School and his other responsibilities in the College of Engineering, Ben continued to give attention to the classroom, particularly in the required sophomore course, *Introduction to Electrical Systems*. With Professor Michael Kelley, he published in 1989 a text for that course entitled *Introductory Linear Electrical Circuits and Electronics*. Ben was also an active class advisor throughout his career in the School. He retired on July 1, 1988 as Professor Emeritus, almost 51 years after he first entered Cornell as a freshman.

No account of Ben's career would be complete without mention of his political activities, especially after his retirement. From an early age, he was influenced by his parents, who were political refugees from Czarist Russia, dedicated Communists who strongly believed that education was vital to the improvement of society. (Ben's mother ran for the U.S. Congress on the Communist Party ticket and one of her relatives is buried in the Kremlin wall!) So it is not surprising that Ben was committed throughout his life to the promotion of social justice and education, especially science education. In 1968, he ran for Congress on the Democratic ticket against the

Republican incumbent but was defeated. Later he became involved in community affairs, was elected to the Ithaca Common Council in the late 1980s, and also served on the Board of Public Works, the Board of Planning and Development, the Cable Transmission Commission, and the Hydropower Commission.

Following his retirement, Ben launched an active campaign for mayor on the Democratic ticket and this time won the election in November 1989 with a platform that emphasized programs for youth, affordable housing, increased public participation in community affairs, and improved relations between the city and Cornell (including increased financial support from Cornell for the city, in lieu of taxes, to help defray fire protection and other costs). He was reelected in November 1991 and 1993 and served until 1995. (An interesting historical note: many years earlier another professor of electrical engineering also ran for mayor of Ithaca, but lost.) Ben was quite pleased to be known as “Ithaca’s Socialist Mayor” (he was a member of the Democratic Socialists of America).

Even in his 80s, Ben continued to argue publicly and passionately for his personal beliefs and causes. He served on the Ithaca City School Board and participated in a demonstration demanding the resignation of the superintendent of the Ithaca City School District over the application of a New York State Human Rights Law to an Ithaca racial discrimination case. He had the “honor” of receiving a police citation while joining students in fervently protesting the clearing of Redbud Woods to make way for a parking lot for the new west campus dormitories. Less than two months before his death, he spoke at the dedication of a plaque marking the spot near University Avenue where these woods once stood.

Ben and Ethel Baron were married in New York City on September 10, 1942. Ethel died nearly 49 years later in Ithaca on July 20, 1991. Ben married Judith Van Allen in Ithaca on September 20, 1995. Ben is survived by Judith and her daughter, Adrian; by the children of his first marriage, Mary Nichols Daum, and her husband, John, and his son, Jeffrey N. and his wife, Arlene; by his older brother, Joseph Nichols; and by five grandchildren and three great grandchildren.

Professor Nichols was a dedicated educator and a provocative colleague who was passionate in his concern for social justice for both men and women. He worked hard to make the world a better place.

*Michael Kelley, Chairperson; Donald Farley, Simpson Linke
(with acknowledgements to Judith Van Allen)*