

Alison P. Casarett

April 17, 1930 — June 1, 2002

Alison Casarett was a woman of strong convictions, unusual stamina, and great personal courage. Through the ordeals of the past several years, since her cancer was diagnosed, she refused to give up. She continued to live her life to the fullest through the sheer force of her determination and spirit. In her final week, someone suggested that she consider moving into the Hospicare Program. She retorted, “I get to decide that myself and I’m not ready.” And even on her last day, she would not give in to the cancer, and instead spent time at the Farmer’s Market, shopping and visiting as she had done so often over the years. One would expect nothing less of someone with two Episcopal bishops in her lineage.

Alison’s determination and courage were defining characteristics of her life, and they asserted themselves early on. She was born on April 17, 1930 in Richmond Hill, New York, the daughter of Edith and John Croes Provoost, and grew up in Sea Cliff, New York. She chose a career in science at a time when very few women considered a career at all, much less a career in a scientific field. She earned her B.S. degree in Mathematics at St. Lawrence University in 1951, followed by M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in Radiation Biology at the University of Rochester.

She joined Cornell in 1963 as an Assistant Professor of Radiation Biology and was promoted to Associate Professor with tenure in 1969, before advancing to full Professor in 1979. She was a productive researcher, with many journal articles and textbooks on radiation biology to her credit, and a teaching schedule that included courses on the biological effects of radiation, radiological physics, and applied radiation biology for veterinary students.

Early in her Cornell career, Alison demonstrated another talent not usually recognized in women of her era—a gift for administration. Upon her arrival at Cornell, she served as Associate Director of the academic-year Institute in Radiation Biology, sponsored by the National Science Foundation and the Atomic Energy Commission. A few years later, she became the program’s director.

Then in 1973, in a career move that again required a great deal of courage, Alison began a two-decade association with the Cornell Graduate School—first as Associate Dean, and then, beginning in 1979, as Dean for fourteen years. This made her not just the first woman to become Dean of Cornell’s Graduate School, but one of the pioneering women leaders of the University. She was Dean for a record-breaking three consecutive terms. Her length of service as Dean of the Graduate School surpassed that of any of her predecessors, and her immediate successor

doubts that it will be equaled in the future. During part of her time in the Graduate School, from 1978-84, she also served as Vice Provost, a post in which she gained a university-wide perspective.

During Alison's deanship, graduate applications to Cornell doubled, enrollment reached record highs that are only now being once again approached, and many graduate programs advanced to be among the nation's best. Yet Alison's achievements at the Graduate School are perhaps most notable on a human scale. A faculty member who served with Alison on a graduate fellowship committee credited her with designing a selection process marked by simplicity, efficiency, and warm camaraderie—a significant departure from the temper of many university committees on which he had served.

Though Alison sometimes tried to be gruff and crusty with graduate students, she was a lousy actor and in the end fooled nobody. She couldn't help revealing her zealous concern for their individual and collective welfare. She worked very hard to make their lives as stress-free as possible so that they could focus on their research and scholarship. She was instrumental in creating a graduate center in the Big Red Barn to give "her" students a social center to call their own. She championed a Graduate and Professional Student Assembly (GPSA) to represent her students in university governance, and the GPSA continues as a reality at Cornell today. Countless former graduate students, especially in the humanities and some of the basic social sciences, remain grateful to Alison for her role in creating multi-year, twelve-month support packages that enabled them to make sustained progress toward their degrees. In establishing this practice, Alison put Cornell a decade ahead of nearly all other top graduate schools in the country.

But as involved as Alison was in the operations of the Graduate School day by day, it was international liaisons that were her special strength. When one of us—Bob Cooke—was invited by Dale Corson to serve as the University Marshal (i.e. the presiding officer at Commencement), he initially declined, saying that he lacked the courage to read the names of the Ph.D. candidates from around the world. After Alison was convinced to handle that duty, he agreed to take on the remaining assignment. "My admiration continues for Alison's courage and ability to pronounce all those complicated names." Here, as in other respects, she has had no true successor: after various less-than-satisfactory efforts, the task has now been turned over to the students themselves.

Undoubtedly Alison's comfort zone with languages and world travel played an important role in her subsequent successes in expanding Cornell's international presence. Another of us—Frank Rhodes—recalls a trip to China in 1980, just shortly after that country was opened to the Western world, in which he, Alison, and several others

from Cornell were involved. The trip was so grueling that many of the participants were barely on speaking terms by its conclusion.

“Two memories from that trip remain etched in my mind even after more than 20 years—the insufferable dust, which completely took away my voice, and how at the Beijing Zoo, Alison turned out to be more of an attraction than the giant pandas we had come to see, for it was extremely rare to see a fair-haired Westerner in China then.”

Thanks to Alison’s superb follow-through, many of the partnerships explored during that trip came to fruition over time, as Alison patiently, imaginatively, and successfully built exchanges involving graduate students and faculty members in Asia and also in Africa. So great was Alison’s success in building international linkages that in 1993, as she approached retirement and prepared to step down as Dean of the Graduate School, she was asked to take on a new assignment—to explore the idea of establishing an international consortium of universities that, like Cornell, were interested in taking practical steps to share students, faculty members, and electronic communication. She was appointed Special Assistant to the President in 1993 until her retirement in 1995, when she was named Professor Emerita, Physiology; and Special Assistant to the President and former Dean of the Graduate School, Emerita. Her efforts during her final two pre-retirement years set the stage for making Cornell more global in scope.

After retirement from Cornell, Alison served on the Boards of the New York State Electric and Gas Corporation and of Hospicare of Tompkins County, was president of the Hospicare Foundation, helped lead the Cornell Association of Professors Emeriti, and was an active member of the Ithaca Garden Club and the Ithaca Swim Club, where one of us fondly remembers swimming laps next to her and then tapping her for professional advice. She was an avid traveler and explorer long after her institution-building work for Cornell had come to a close and even in the later stages of her illness, visiting 37 countries across five continents in all.

Others will have their own recollections of Alison. She was a valued friend, who, in what was to be her last act of next-door-neighborly kindness just before her death, brought a pastry to one of us. She cared meticulously for Annie, her cocker spaniel. She was the loving mother of Elissa and Jenel, whose accomplishments were always a source of pride and joy for her. Alison was all those things, and much, much more. She is survived by Elissa and her son-in-law, Tim Rice; by Jenel and her son-in-law, Ed Polido; and by her four granddaughters: Elizabeth, Katherine, Jessica, and Lea.

Sophocles wrote, “One must wait until the evening to see how splendid the day was.” Alison Casarett’s day was splendid indeed. For almost four decades, she offered exemplary service and strong leadership to Cornell and our

community. Her hallmarks were vision, excellence, courage, and grace. In the breadth of her achievements, in the scope of her concern, in the wisdom of her experience, she strengthened this university and our community as she enriched and ennobled our lives.

We mourn the passing of Alison Casarett. We miss her presence in our midst. But we also celebrate, as we reflect together on the remarkable ways in which Alison transformed our university, enlivened our community, and touched each of our lives. Although she is gone from us now, in our hearts and our minds she lives. For over a life so fully, generously, and courageously lived, death can have no dominion.

J. Robert Cooke, Francis Kallfelz, Frank H.T. Rhodes, Walter Cohen