

# Gwendolyn J. Bymers

*June 19, 1915 — April 13, 2001*

Gwen J. Bymers, Professor and Chair Emerita of Consumer Economics, died on April 13, 2001 at age 85, after a second bout with cancer. As a member of the Faculty from 1956-77, Gwen left her mark on both the college and the department for her leadership role in two transitions: that of the College from Home Economics to Human Ecology and that of the Department from Household Economics and Management to Consumer Economics and Policy. A second major contribution was her ability to inspire, encourage, and guide her students on their career paths.

Gwen Bymers' character and approach to life were shaped by two transcendent experiences: (1) growing up on a prairie farm in the Dakotas and (2) the postwar GI Bill.

Gwen graduated from high school in 1932 at the very bottom of the Great Depression. She attended Normal School and taught country school for two years before moving to the Big City—Chicago. There she studied briefly at the American Academy of Art, before becoming a Custom Dressmaker.

When World War II intervened, Gwen joined the WAC (Women's Army Corp), serving first as weather observer in New Hampshire, and then in Paris, where her horizons were truly expanded.

The World War II GI Bill that underwrote university education for former GIs served Gwen extremely well. She entered the University of North Dakota, majoring in Economics and Business Administration in 1946. She received her B.S. degree in 1948. She continued her education with Graduate Studies in Economics at UCLA where she earned a Ph.D. degree in Economics in 1958 under the direction of George Hildebrand, later an ILR faculty member. In the interstices of her Ph.D. Program, Gwen was a Lecturer in Family Economics at UCLA for three years, and served for two years as Economist at the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Gwen came, by train, to Cornell in 1956 to become Assistant Professor in the Department of Household Economics and Management, the first economist to grace its roll. Gwen fitted herself into her department and into Home Economics. But she was always an agent for change where it seemed appropriate. In the late 1960s, the college initiated a review of both structure and program. Gwen was a valued member of the Review Committee, and during discussions of reorganization, showed her dedication to the interests of the whole college and the preparation for the new concerns at the end of the 20th Century. Henry Ricciuti, Chair of the committee charged with the reorganization of the college in the late 1960s, comments:

*“This Committee dealt with a number of ticklish problems: whether there should be changes in the departmental structure of the college, possible deletion of some departments, shifts of faculty from one department to the other, a subject matter reorganization among departments. In all this, Gwen Bymers’ dedication to the interest of the college—not her department—was highly visible. She was open, forceful, but diplomatic. An extremely valuable participant.”*

In 1969, Gwen became the Chair of the newly formed Department of Consumer Economics and Public Policy. Under her leadership, the department attracted an increasing number of young, discipline-based faculty who brought new viewpoints to the issues, yet were held together by the commitment to the well being of consumers and households. Gwen demanded and obtained dedication from the new recruits. She had a strong sense of good performance, for herself *and* for others.

Gwen’s leadership was recognized during her entire tenure at Cornell. Besides a seven-year stint as Chair, Gwen served on the University Council and the university-wide Faculty Council of Representatives.

As an excellent teacher, Gwen inspired her students, not to become followers, but to develop their own career paths whether in academic positions or in business. (In 1999, the American Council on Consumer Interests conferred its Super Mentor award on Gwen, 22 years after her formal retirement.) Karen Stein, a 1974 Master’s student from CEPP and Chair of the Consumer Studies Department at the University of Delaware, said:

*“It was Gwen Bymers who convinced me through her actions, her leadership positions, and her personal history that one should never be hesitant about accepting challenges and reaching beyond the expected. She showed me by example what it means to exhibit leadership...I found my own voice because of Gwen Bymers!”*

In 1957, Gwen Bymers, in partnership with Professors Kathryn Walker and Mary Wood, purchased “The Cottage,” a summer retreat 3 miles from Ithaca up the West Side of Lake Cayuga. The hospitality of *Walk-By-Wood* was legendary. There is scarcely a colleague, staff member, graduate or undergraduate student from 1957-90 whom did not experience the hospitality of “The Cottage,” whether in the form of a meal, picnic, boat ride, a drink, etc. In 1990, the three professors donated “The Cottage” to the college, directing that the proceeds should be used to support graduate students in Consumer Economics and Housing.

Gwen was a member of the appropriate professional organizations: the American Economics Association, the American Council on Consumer Interests, the American Home Economics Association, and the Society for Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business. She was a Consultant to J.C. Penney, Corning Glass Works, Life Insurance Institute, and BLS. And she put in overseas stints as a Visiting Fellow, University of Ghana in 1973-74; and as a Lecturer at the Salzburg Seminar.

In 1974, the University of North Dakota conferred on her its Sioux Award for distinguished service in her field. In 1977, the year of her retirement, Gwen was chosen to deliver the Colston Warne Lecture at the Annual Conference of the American Council on Consumer Affairs.

Gwen was a vigorous participant in the Ithaca community. She was an active member of the First Unitarian Church. She served as a Director of the Citizens Savings Bank and on the Boards of the Ladies Union Benevolent Society, McGraw House, and the Kitchen Cupboard and also was active in the Friends of the Tompkins County Public Library.

Gwen Byrners has left a rich legacy in the department, the college, and the profession.

*W. Keith Bryant, E. Scott Maynes, Jean R. Robinson*