

Deborah Rabinowitz

September 9, 1947 — August 18, 1987

Deborah Rabinowitz was born in Willimantic, Connecticut. She grew up in Willimantic, attending the public schools there. Deborah received an undergraduate degree in biology from New College (Florida) and a Ph.D. in theoretical population biology from the University of Chicago in 1975. She then accepted a faculty position at the University of Michigan where she became the first woman faculty member in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. In 1982 we persuaded Deborah to accept a tenured faculty position at Cornell in the Section of Ecology and Systematics within the Division of Biological Sciences, where she prospered until her death in August, 1987.

Although Deborah had only twelve years between her Ph.D. degree and her death at the age of thirty-nine, she made substantial contributions to the general field of plant population biology. By far her most significant contribution is to our understanding of why some kinds of plants are so much less common than others. The question of differences in species abundances has had a long history of interest in ecology, but Deborah brought to it a fresh and highly original approach. In 1981 she published a landmark paper in which she described seven different meanings of the concept of “rarity”. Deborah’s seven senses of rarity helped to eliminate confusion and fuzzy thinking in the literature. Deborah also published the results of empirical and experimental studies that helped our understanding of rarity in particular plant species. She recently, for example, used the well studied British flora as a case study with which to examine her seven concepts of rarity. Interestingly, she found that the least frequent kind of rarity was not what most of us think, namely endemic plants that have narrow geographical ranges and specialized habitat requirements. Instead, based on the plants of the British Isles, the least frequent kind of rarity is the class of sparse species which have large geographical ranges, occur in many habitat types, but which have small population sizes in any given habitat.

On the personal side Deborah was special in many ways. It is clear that she was an important role model for women scientists at Cornell, at the University of Michigan, and more generally within the Ecological Society of America. Both her scholarship and personal style were considered worthy of emulation. She was broad-minded and generous in sharing her insights and in encouraging others, especially women scientists. Her office and laboratory — which usually contained fresh flowers in elegant vases — had an air of organized productivity and clean, clear thinking amidst warmth and gentility. Deborah also had strong interests in international politics and was active at Cornell

in demonstrations, workshops, and other efforts to try to make the world, notably South Africa and Nicaragua, a more humane place. Those of us around Deborah since her cancer was diagnosed saw another dimension of her specialness: the strength of character and the grace that she maintained to the end. Deborah struck a balance: on the one hand, she seldom raised the issue of her sickness, permitting normal professional business and personal relationships to be maintained without awkwardness and without people feeling sorry for her; on the other hand, she talked freely and openly about her condition when asked.

Two anecdotes underscore these points. The first involves a faculty colleague of Deborah's. She and this colleague had served together for a couple of years on the curriculum committee of the Division of Biological Sciences, and their committee had many long meetings during this time, as there are few issues that faculties spend more time discussing than revisions of curriculum. Upon learning that Deborah had died of cancer, her colleague remarked that he hadn't even known that Deborah had been sick, so "normally" had she carried out her duties as a committee member and colleague. The second story is best known to those of us who shared Corson Hall with Deborah. In encountering her in the hallway in the last years, we would invariably be greeted with "How are you?" when it was we who should have been asking the same of Deborah. She asked about us before we could ask about her not because she was unwilling or unable to talk about herself, but because she had always been genuinely interested in her many friends and she saw no reason to change on account of her sickness. In maintaining her grace and humanity to the end, Deborah taught us all something about how to "live" with cancer, to borrow Jack Lewis' apt phrase.

Jonathan Silvertown, a British plant ecologist and one of Deborah's many international colleagues, expressed what many of us felt:

"To apply Deborah's classification to herself: her geographical range was broad (USA, Britain, Panama, Peru), she worked in several habitats (mangroves, prairie, agroecosystems), and she possessed a combination of qualities that are nowhere common. She was among the rarest of the rare."

Deborah is survived by her husband, Peter Ewel; her mother, Margaret Rabinowitz; and her sister, Margaret Russo.

Barbara L. Bedford, Peter L. Marks, Robert E. Cook