

# Jean T. McKelvey

*February 9, 1908 — January 5, 1998*

Jean McKelvey was a superb teacher, arbitrator of labor disputes, mentor to many, and one of the ILR School's founding faculty in 1945. As "Founding Mother," Jean and now Professor Emeritus Maurice Neufeld, established the fields of study, created a curriculum, interviewed the first student applicants, and taught five courses each. Professor Neufeld remembers Jean as "the best teacher we ever had."

Jean's first love was teaching. She brought to her classroom discussion and scholarly investigations the zest for excellence that had marked her academic and athletic accomplishments at Wellesley College and as a graduate student at Radcliffe College. There she earned her Ph.D. degree with her study, "AFL Attitudes Toward Production." Before coming to Cornell, she served as a superb teacher at Sarah Lawrence College. At Cornell, ILR students cherished the privilege of enrolling in her renowned course in Arbitration. When she and Bertram Willcox, the keen-minded and gently spoken Professor of Law, joined forces, they squared the circle. Students in the Law School and ILR deemed admission to the Red and Blue Pencil Course—red for McKelvey's comments, blue for Willcox's—the entrance to the Supreme Stoa itself.

As one of Professor McKelvey's former students recalled:

*"She was revered by her students. She drove her students relentlessly, but always with compassion [and] had an infectious enthusiasm about her work that inspired her students. She 'embraced' you when she evaluated your work, so you felt challenged, not put-down, when she offered criticism."*

The hallmark of Jean McKelvey's distinguished career in industrial and labor relations was the linkage she forged between classroom teaching and the practitioner world. Her career reflected this dual commitment. During World War II Jean entered the field of labor dispute settlement as a hearing officer with the War Labor Board while teaching economics at Sarah Lawrence College. As Professor at Cornell's ILR School, she shared her experiences and insights from labor relations practice with her students, invited leading practitioners to campus and arranged field trips where students had an opportunity to observe collective bargaining and arbitration in action.

A pioneer for women, in 1947, Jean McKelvey was the first woman to be admitted to the prestigious National Academy of Arbitrators and in 1970 became its first woman president. She was among the most sought after and admired leaders in dispute resolution. New York's Governors appointed her to the State Board of Mediation (1955-66); United States Presidents sought her out to serve on Emergency Boards to settle disputes in the railroad

industry and appointed her a founding member of the Federal Service Impasses Panel (1970-90) to resolve employment conflicts for federal workers. She arbitrated hundreds of disputes in industries ranging from public sector to airlines and manufacturing. In addition, both the American Federation of Teachers and the United Auto Workers appointed her to their Public Review Boards to resolve internal union disputes.

Her outstanding achievements in labor arbitration were even more remarkable because it was, and to a great extent still is, dominated by men. Jean loved telling the story of her first arbitration when she “walked into the room and there was nothing but men there; one looked up and said, ‘Oh, you’re the secretary’ and I said, ‘No, I’m the arbitrator.’” When Jean’s term as President of the National Academy of Arbitrators ended, she was presented with a gavel inscribed, “To Jean T. McKelvey, President, 1970, With the Affection and Esteem of His Colleagues.” As another former student recalled, “Jean, who liked to suggest that she was sometimes mistaken as the male offspring of French-Scottish parents when selected from a list of arbitrators by parties who did not know her, chose not to have the inscription changed.”

Much of Professor McKelvey’s finest work was dedicated to opening the arbitration profession to women and minorities. She developed and directed special arbitration training programs intended to integrate the profession. These programs, in fact, trained a new and more inclusive generation of arbitrators. Many of Jean’s former students went on to fill influential positions as union leaders, arbitrators and jurists. She also helped found, chair and financially support the Saul Wallen Fund for Minority students which provides scholarships for practitioners, particularly women and minorities, to enroll in college credit and certificate courses. In her own strong and persistent way, Jean worked against injustice.

Professor McKelvey also produced important scholarly works including books and monographs such as *The Duty of Fair Representation* (1977) and *Cleared for Takeoff: Airline Labor Relations Since Deregulation* (1988). Her articles appeared in the *Journal of Negro History*, the *Journal of Political Economy*, the *Arbitration Journal*, the *Cornell Law Quarterly*, *ILR Research*, and the *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*.

During her career, Jean was the recipient of many honors including distinguished service awards from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (1973), the Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution (1989), and the Society of Federal Labor Relations Professionals (1990). Her alma mater, Wellesley College, bestowed the Distinguished Alumnae Award for Public Service in 1975 and the American Arbitration Association gave her its Arbitrator of the Year Award in 1983. In her hometown, East Orange, New Jersey, the United Automobile Workers Union (UAW) honored Jean by naming a housing project after her. In 1998, after her death, she received the UAW convention’s

prestigious award for contributions to Social Justice (an award given to such international figures as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.)

At age 65, when Professor McKelvey took her official retirement from Cornell resident teaching, she began a new career in ILR extension where she conducted conferences on key labor relations issues and directed a statewide program of off-campus graduate credit programs in industrial relations. When Jean's dear friend Alice Grant died in 1988, Jean helped endow the Jean McKelvey-Alice Grant Professorship of Labor-Management Relations – the ILR School's first fully endowed chair.

One final note. Professor McKelvey's kindness and generosity extended to colleagues as well. When Professor Gross was a new, untenured assistant professor, for example, Jean invited him to teach a section of her beloved arbitration course and shared her reading lists, outlines and notes with him, all the while encouraging him to present the course in his own way. This most distinguished professor and nationally respected arbitrator was concerned about the welfare and progress of a young, untenured colleague. Her humanity and compassion were at the core of who she was and what she did.

Professor McKelvey was teacher, professional, scholar, friend, colleague, mentor to so many, and inspiration to all. As one of her colleagues said, Jean "will always bring happy recollections whenever I hear or read her name."

Professor McKelvey is survived by her husband of 63 years, Blake McKelvey, Rochester's city historian.

*Lois Gray, Maurice Neufeld, James Gross*