



Jerry Margaret Rivers

September 29, 1929 – October 6, 2011

When Jerry Rivers retired and became Professor Emerita of Nutritional Sciences in 1984, after twenty-two years at Cornell, her colleagues celebrated her contributions to science, to dietetics, to the College of Human Ecology, and to the university at large. She brought to her research and teaching curiosity, intelligence, and fervor, which meant that all who were touched by her were inspired to perform at their best.

In her warm drawl, which one suspects purposefully never left her, Jerry would tell you that she was born and grew up on a farm in Bogota, a small town in Northeast Texas. There she learned to care for her own livestock, for which she earned multiple awards. The money she earned went to necessities for schoolbooks and clothes. Perhaps more importantly, her experience raising livestock taught her the importance of nurturing in all senses of the word. It is not surprising, then, that she chose to major in Food and Nutrition as an undergraduate at Texas Technological University in Lubbock, Texas. Following her graduation in 1951, she completed a dietetic internship at the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital on Staten Island. This internship introduced her to some of the most difficult problems a dietitian must face. The compassion these problems kindled in her later brought fire to her teaching, because she realized that her students must be the best they can be in order to serve their patients most effectively.

In 1953 she returned to Texas to become a therapeutic dietitian at the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Fort Worth. The following year her natural leadership skills led her to become Director of Dietetics at the Methodist Hospital in Lubbock, Texas. Ever intellectually curious, she realized that she wanted to learn more, and to contribute to nutritional knowledge as well as care. She returned to Texas Technological University where she obtained her MS degree in Nutrition and Chemistry in 1958 with a thesis entitled: "A study of the influence of dietary protein on resistance of the albino rat to whole body irradiation at multiple sublethal doses." She then earned her Ph.D. in Nutrition and Biochemistry at Pennsylvania State University in 1962. Her dissertation topic was "Human metabolism of L-ascorbic acid and erythorbic acid." After

completion of her degree she was invited to become a faculty member of the College of Home Economics at Cornell University, an invitation she gladly accepted.

Ascorbic acid in all its roles was a major focus of Jerry's research. With the help of thirty-three graduate students whom she mentored over the years, she first established the importance of vitamin C in pregnancy and in persons using oral contraceptives. She then turned her attention to the role of ascorbate in the function of endocrine glands, including the thyroid and the adrenal gland. As megadoses of vitamin C became popular in the 1970's, she carried out research into the detrimental effects of excessive vitamin C intake on endocrine function and on drug metabolism. She had NIH support to develop the guinea pig as an important model for vitamin C research. All of her findings have become part of the "common" knowledge concerning vitamin C.

At Cornell, Jerry found that she had a knack for teaching. A key ingredient of teaching, she said, was to be completely aware of students, where they are in their learning, and how to help each of them learn and practice what they learned in the way that suited them best as individuals. Her research and teaching earned her promotion to Full Professor in 1972.

In 1976, she was the principal investigator for an innovative federally-funded program in allied health awarded to the university, with the goal of creating scholar practitioners of nutrition and dietetics, who would be an integral part of health care teams. Though the program was discontinued after 10 years because of changes in the way dietitians could obtain licensure, in its time it produced a number of highly trained practitioners who went on to make a mark on the profession and on nutritional sciences generally.

Long before problem-based learning became the watchword for cutting edge teaching in the health professions, Jerry and her colleague Daphne Roe organized a course on nutrition and disease that emphasized student collaboration in solving the problems of real patients. Problem-based learning meant deep thinking and examining patient issues from all possible angles, from the biochemical to the social. Jerry's experience and compassion contributed to making this course, and the other courses she taught, "must takes" for students from all over the campus.

Her interest in the well-being of students led her to be active in a number of campus initiatives. One stand-out among her accomplishments was her work on the committee that developed the College of Human Ecology from the College of Home Economics in 1969, and the Division of Nutritional Sciences in 1974 from the Department of Food and Nutrition and the Graduate School of Nutrition in 1974.

As a person of Cherokee descent, she was tapped to be chair of the Provost's Minority Education council, an initiative that led formation of the American Indian Affairs Committee, the committee that was responsible for creating and implementing the American Indian Studies program. Not incidentally, her knowledge of Native American ways was not confined to an understanding of her family tree. She also had an extensive knowledge of the medicinal uses of native American plants that she shared with those who happened to ask.

It wasn't just students who received counsel from Jerry; young faculty members could always count on her support and guidance, helping them weather their first years in academia more gracefully. Staff, too, found her door open and her ear ready to listen to their needs.

In service beyond the Cornell campus, Jerry served as the College Representative for Liaison with the New York State Legislature, and helped guide the Multi-Disciplinary East Harlem Nutrition Program. This program was a pilot that eventually led to the Expanded Food and Nutrition Program (EFNEP), a USDA program that continues to help some of the state's most needy citizens. As a member of the American Dietetic Association, she helped develop Plan IV, Minimum Academic Requirements for Membership, which assured that programs such as Cornell's could maintain their roles and standards in educating future dietitians.

After retirement from Cornell, Jerry returned to her farming roots. In partnership with her colleague and friend Professor Marge Devine, she created and ran a Christmas tree farm for ten years. Illness prevented her from continuing this project, and she finally retired for good in 1994.

Jerry's vision of the future of nutrition and dietetics, and how that vision could continue into a reality, inspired all who were exposed to Jerry's enthusiasm and knowledge. She gave of herself warmly and openly, greatly enriching the lives of all who are still touched by her legacy.

Virginia Utermohlen, Chairperson; Malden C. Nesheim, Marge Devine