

Ronald D. Mack

January 30, 1940 — November 26, 1993

Ron Mack was a man of great creative energy, an inspired teacher and storyteller, and a counselor-in-residence for his colleagues in the Department of Psychology during his twenty-two years at Cornell. Before his untimely death after a long fight with cancer, he was taking on the role of departmental patriarch and historian. He leaves in the community his son, Joshua Mack, of his first marriage to Linda Mack, and his wife, Joanne Taormina and their two children, Hannah and Ari. His ebullient personality is missed by everyone whose lives he touched.

He was born in 1940 in Portland, Maine. He attended Brandeis University, where he combined psychology and Near Eastern and Judaic studies, financed in part, he claimed, by summer jobs as a standup comedian. For a time, he explored a career as a rabbi, but later took his Ph.D. in clinical psychology at Columbia University. Proud of his Jewish identity, he explicitly took the role of minority representative and cultural translator, first in Portland, later in Tunisia where he did the research for his thesis, and then in the South where he did his internship. He continued as a different kind of cultural translator in his role as a teacher of clinical psychology to policemen, and finally, to experimental psychologists at Cornell.

Many students who major in psychology are interested in eventual clinical work and wish to take courses that will prepare them for careers in that area. It is difficult to find “real” clinicians who can advise students on possible careers, open doors to clinical practice to them, and yet provide enough academic structure to teach challenging courses. Cornell was looking for such a person, and found Ron Mack in 1971. His extraordinary teaching and organizational skill enabled him not only to develop the academic program in abnormal and clinical psychology, but also to develop fieldwork opportunities for undergraduates. He carried this load, which was not without its intrinsic strains, with great success throughout his career.

His courses were extraordinary, and he won the Clark Distinguished Teaching award in 1988. From a constant stream of testimonials, one will suffice. In 1986, junior and senior psychology majors were asked, “Which psychology courses do you think were most valuable to you and why?”, and more than a third mentioned a course taught by Ron Mack (out of a faculty numbering about 25). His largest, most popular course, “Introductory Psychopathology,” took a developmental, personal and psychodynamic approach to the subject. When Ron began his training, psychodynamic and pharmacological approaches to psychopathology were on an equal footing, but the field progressively medicalized its understanding of both the causes and treatment of mental illness. Ron

insisted on showing his students the person rather than the disorder. Similarly, as a therapist, he asked clients to find the health amidst their symptoms, effectively fighting a progressive depersonalization of this most personal of subjects. He also taught seminars on methods in psychotherapy, an intense experience which students often called “the most influential course in my life”, and he organized a number of fieldwork opportunities which gave students one-on-one experience in helping relationships in the community.

The fieldwork experiences were valuable for both Cornell students and the community. In 1973, he founded Evergreen, a student-run halfway house for mental patients, now a part of Community Living Services of H.O.M.E.S. Inc. They honored him in 1993 with the first presentation of Lifetime Service Award, named for him. Fieldwork placements were also available in the local elementary schools with emotionally disturbed or learning disabled children, in psychiatric centers and in juvenile correction centers. In addition to his ongoing practice in psychotherapy, Ron Mack also served as a consultant for a large number of these community institutions, and was a leader in mental health issues in this region of New York.

For his colleagues, his role in the department is the greatest loss. Particularly in his first years here, he constantly organized legendary social events—the ongoing Assistant Professors’ Banquets, Polyester Day, the Ron Mack Look-Alike Contest. The last Assistant Professor Banquet, held for Ron a month before his death, brought back former colleagues now spread across the country. Not many academic departments have their own therapist, but the Psychology Department had one. When a major dispute arose in the Department, he was able to counsel every side, help people understand the structure of their points of view and show how differences could be resolved. As a result, a style of problem solving emerged based on openness and directness and consensus, which we hope will be able to survive.

Howard Feinstein, Bruce Halpern, Richard Polenberg, Barbara L. Finlay