

# Robert Stern

*May 12, 1948 — April 22, 2001*

Robert Stern was a superb teacher and scholar, and an inspiration to faculty, staff, and students in the ILR School. Bob joined the School in 1974, after earning an A.B. degree from Washington University in St. Louis in 1970, and M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Sociology from Vanderbilt University. He struggled with diabetes throughout his life, and his health deteriorated in the last decade, yet he gave an immense amount of time and energy to Cornell, his students, scholarly organizations in his field, and the Ithaca community.

Professor Stern's research focused on problems of organizational governance and on the sources and nature of organizational conflict. Early in his Cornell career, he became part of a research team studying the effects of employee stockownership, which was then becoming a mechanism for preventing plant closures. He concentrated his efforts on the conflicts that ensue when new ownership structures emerge but old patterns of governance remain. When a series of case studies of worker buy-outs demonstrated the failure of existing corporate governance structures to accommodate the interests of employee owners, he turned his research attention to employee membership on corporate boards as a possible labor voice mechanism. Ever the sociologist, it irked him no end that two of the articles from this research were published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, but as he acknowledged with a sigh, it was the price he had to pay for collaborative research. Bob liked collaborative research, however, because it afforded an opportunity to examine organizational problems from multiple perspectives. It also gave him the chance to correct his co-authors' poor syntax. He felt there was much to do on that score. Most of his other research on industrial democracy, strike duration, and trade union membership programs, also was joint with ILR faculty, appearing in more palatable journals in industrial relations, sociology, and organizational theory.

Bob Stern was a productive scholar, producing seven books and monographs and dozens of articles, but he was first and foremost a teacher and mentor. As Professor Deborah Balsler, one of his former graduate students, has written:

*"Bob knew that the way he dealt with students had an important impact on their lives. He understood that he could publish a hundred articles in academic journals but it was in dealing with students that he made a difference."*

Bob was an original member of the ILR School's Teaching Advisory Committee, and he was the committee's spark, always looking for ways to improve his own teaching and that of others. He also was a mentor of young faculty members, both in his own department of Organizational Behavior and in other departments within the School.

Bob taught courses on regulating corporations and on the sociology of industrial conflict. Perhaps his favorite course was on organizational behavior simulations, in which students participated in games that modeled running a company and executive and cooperative decision making. The course required large blocks of time to play the simulations, so Bob taught it at night, even when his health was failing and he was no longer able to drive after dark. It was difficult for him to continue teaching the course, but he thought it was intellectually stimulating and useful for students, so he found ways to do it.

Bob was a colleague of wide-ranging interests in an era of rigid disciplinary boundaries. Professor Balser writes that Bob “liked learning new things.” Professor Robert Hutchens, who worked with Bob and Professor David Lipsky on an interdisciplinary study of the role of government transfers in strike behavior, recalls that:

*The three of us shared a common interest, but came from different disciplines. Bob wanted us to go beyond disciplinary boundaries and produce joint work. Part of his excitement for the project arose out of bringing us together and encouraging us to work on the same question.*

One way that Bob learned new things and met new people was through travel. He used his sabbaticals to visit new places: in 1981-82, he was a Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands; in 1988-89, he visited the University of California at Berkeley; and in 1996-97, he visited Queensland University of Technology and Monash University in Australia. The year in Australia was a triumph over adversity. Bob had already lost a leg, but he carried on with the trip, visiting and lecturing at various universities and doing things that tourists do, including white water rafting. He had a marvelous year and brought back stuffed toys and other knick-knacks that still grace faculty offices.

In 1997, despite mounting health problems, Bob became the Director of Graduate Studies in the ILR School. He reasoned that if he could not do as much scholarly research as in the past, he could still serve the School in another capacity. Bob was an excellent choice for the job: he was committed to both the professional masters program and to the M.S./Ph.D. program, he enjoyed meeting prospective students, he was interested in the work of people in disciplines other than his own, he was fair, and he always was sympathetic to students with academic, personal, or financial problems.

Bob had a wonderful and irreverent sense of humor, which he applied to his and other’s academic work and to his physical ailments. Professor Hutchens writes that for Bob,

*“ideas were not to be taken too seriously. They were just ideas. One could poke fun at them. . . . Bob loved to pose a question that couldn’t be fully answered by an economic model. This was always done gently, with a smile and a twinkle in his eye. That was part of the fun of joint work.”*

Professor Lee Dyer writes that Bob would occasionally appear outside his office door in his wheelchair, and with a big grin on his face, say in a loud voice: “Dyer, you are in violation of OSHA standards. I have urgent business to conduct here and my chair won’t fit through the door.” In this way, Bob “managed to convey a subtle awareness of his physical condition coupled with his uncanny ability to make the most of that condition for the greater good.”

Bob also led a full life outside of Ives Hall. He was an active member of Temple Beth El; he did volunteer work for the Greenstar Cooperative Market; and he served on the Board of Directors of the Finger Lakes Independence Center. He was an avid sports fan, frequently attending Cornell sporting events, especially hockey games, and he enjoyed going to minor league baseball games in Binghamton and Syracuse. He developed a passion for baseball cards and other sports memorabilia relatively late in life, and became a regular attendee at weekend card shows, where he would buy, sell, and trade cards. Although it was unclear if his sports card business was profitable, he obtained many hard to find cards for faculty and staff at Cornell, and he developed a whole new set of friends in the process.

Family was important to Bob. He and his wife, Corinne, brought up two accomplished, loving, and spirited children, Danielle and Ethan, who, like their father, have not been afraid of choosing unusual paths.

The words most often used to describe Bob by his colleagues are “courage,” “spirit,” and “inspiration.” No matter how sick he was, he continued to do his job and to give of himself to others. Professor Ronald Ehrenberg recalls that when his son was seriously ill with a malignant brain tumor, Bob visited him in the hospital and gave him some sage words of advice:

*“Don’t compare yourself to what you were. Don’t compare yourself to the people around you. Just ask how you can make yourself and the people you love as happy as possible.”*

Archivist Richard Strassberg sums up the view of many of us when he writes that:

*“Bob’s determination to continue his work no matter what, his good humor and kindness to others as his own body was failing him, is a tribute to the human spirit and must be an inspiration to all who knew him. He is likely to be the bravest person that we will ever know.”*

*James A. Gross, Tove H. Hammer, George R. Boyer*