



Vern Bengtson

May 2, 1941 - November 8, 2019

Vern Bengtson

Date of Birth

May 2, 1941

Date of Death

November 8, 2019

Vern Bengtson, pioneering gerontologist, sociologist, and mentor, dies at 78

In a USC career that spanned over 50 years, Bengtson explored the roles of faith and family across generations

USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology Professor Vern Bengtson, a social psychologist known for his work on intergenerational relations, passed away on Friday, November 8. He was 78 years old.

“For over half a century at USC, Vern Bengtson defined excellence in gerontology through his important research, dedication to students, and commitment to exploration,” said USC Leonard Davis School Dean Pinchas Cohen. “His findings around family, religion and social change challenged many societal assumptions and are part of his legacy as a global giant in our field.”

Bengtson, who also served as a research professor at the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work and a senior scientist with the USC Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging, originated the Longitudinal Study of Generations, an exploration of family dynamics that tracked up to four successive generations of California families for close to 50 years

and yielded rich insights about aging, conflict, values, faith and spirituality.

“Vern was the quintessential gerontologist and scholar,” said Maria Aranda, Executive Director of the USC Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging and an associate professor of social work. “His work was a living testament to the study of enduring family interactions across generations, contemporary transmission of spiritual beliefs, and the centrality of religion in American families. He understood the greater plan of his work and played a key role in mentoring and supporting faculty, students and staff.”

Born in 1941 in Lindsborg, Kansas to a devoutly religious Evangelical Christian family, Bengtson earned his bachelor of arts degree from North Park College. He completed a master’s degree and PhD in human development and social psychology at the University of Chicago, earning his doctorate in 1967.

His experience as a religious graduate student attending school in the 1960s alongside predominately non-religious peers prompted Bengtson to explore why some people conform to the religious views of their families while others do not.

This research question would come to define his long career and led Bengtson, who joined the faculty of the newly-formed USC Andrus Gerontology Center (the future home of the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology) in 1967, to start the National Institutes of Health-funded Longitudinal Study of Generations. Respondents represented 350 different families who, over eight waves of data collection, spanned the Silent Generation, which came of age during World War I, through late 1980s-born Millennials.

Bengtson’s survey results led to findings that ran counter to prevailing notions around the decline of familial influence, support and spirituality. In fact, he found that the values, attitudes and beliefs of grandparents and parents continued to be transmitted across generations.

Along with frequent USC collaborator Merrill Silverstein, now the Marjorie Cantor Endowed Professor in Aging at Syracuse University, Bengtson was currently co-leading a John F. Templeton Foundation-funded study to better understand spiritual beliefs and pro-social values in the absence of religion among Millennials and their families

Bengtson was the former holder of the AARP University Chair in Gerontology. He also held a joint appointment in the sociology department of the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences. Known for his theories on aging course and for a love of teaching and mentoring, Bengtson taught at USC for over 40 years and was an admired

lecturer, earning three major awards for teaching from the Dornsife College and chairing 34 dissertations.

He was the author of more than 260 articles and 19 books on gerontology, theories of aging, sociology of aging and family sociology. His recent book, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down Across Generations*, surveyed the religious beliefs and spirituality of multiple generations of more than 350 families.

Bengtson was a past president of the Gerontological Society of America, which recognized his research and teaching excellence with its Robert W. Kleemeier Award and a Distinguished Mentor Award. He also received two MERIT awards for research from the National Institute on Aging. Additional honors and awards include the Distinguished Scholar Award from the American Sociological Association's Section on Aging and the Life Course, the Ernest W. Burgess Distinguished Career Award from the National Council on Family Relations, and the Reuben Hill Award from the National Council of Family Relations.

Bengtson had a heightened sense of color, light and beauty, always appreciating new ways to incorporate what he saw into his paintings of his surroundings. A lover of nature he would take to the trails for hours, sometimes with the local goats, and other times with his grandchildren. His love of the mountains was only surpassed by his devotion to his family, his wife, Hannah, and, of course, USC football.

Bengtson was preceded in death by his daughter Julie Bengtson Gregory (Michael). He is survived by his wife Hannah Gruhn-Bengtson, his daughters, Erin Stephens (Alex), Kristina Bryte, and four grandchildren, Boz, Zoë, Zadin and Tyler.

A memorial service will be held at 1:00 pm on December 7 at Trinity Episcopal Church in Santa Barbara, CA. Photo credit to Bob Riha, Jr.

Because of Vern's love of nature, education, and his church home, Trinity Episcopal Church, it is with gratitude that the family asks in lieu of flowers that donations be made in his name to the following organizations: Trinity Episcopal Church, 1500 State Street, Santa Barbara, CA 93101 and Wilderness Youth Project (www.wyp.org).

Previous Events

Memorial Service

DEC 7. 1:00 PM (PT)

Trinity Episcopal Church
1500 State Street
Santa Barbara, CA

Tribute Wall

MJ

“ As a former doctoral student of Vern's at the University of Southern California as well as a graduate research assistant on the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG) at the Andrus Gerontology Center from 1991-1994, I am grateful for having been associated with Vern. He afforded me the opportunity to be a part of the LSOG that helped me pay for my doctoral program, gain significant applied research skills and experience, and meet tremendous mentors (especially Dr. Roseann Giarrusso and Dr. Merrill Silverstein), and co-author my first scholarly publication. Vern, Roseann, and Merrill were all positive role models of what a university professor should be. Despite their tremendous stature in academia and busy lives, they always showed their care for me and other students, providing guidance, scholarly advice, and an ear to listen. Vern also made me feel welcome because of his fondness for the geographic region from which I had come to USC--Fresno (the heart of California's Central Valley)--which is home to many Swedes, especially in Kingsburg. I hope Vern knew, and I want his family to know, the impact he had on me and how I have paid that forward as a professor of sociology at California State University, Fresno for the past 25 years, in caring for my students, extending an ear to hear their concerns and challenges, making them feel welcome, and encouraging them to follow their passion and dreams. Thank you, Vern!

Matthew Jendian - December 08, 2019 at 12:43 PM