In MEMORIAM: A Tribute to GW Geography Professor Emeritus Dorn C. McGrath, Jr (1930-2021)

It is with great sadness that the Department of Geography announces the death of Professor Emeritus Dorn C. McGrath, Jr. on January 25, 2021. Dorn was 90 years old and will be buried in Arlington Cemetery later this year.

Dorn C. McGrath was born in Bradford, Pennsylvania in May 1930. He received his BA from Dartmouth College in 1952, where he was on the ski team and a pitcher for the baseball team. Dorn earned his Masters in City Planning from Harvard University in 1959. He also served in the U.S. Navy (1955-56 in the Civil Engineer Corps; 1958-59 in Spain). Before coming to GW he worked for the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in the Division of Metropolitan Analysis.

Professor McGrath taught for 35 years at GWU, first in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning and later in the Department of Geography. He also founded the Center for Urban and Environmental Research (CUER), an active research center housed in the Department of Geography. He chaired the Department of Geography from 1996 to 2003. Throughout his tenure at the university he worked closely with area neighborhoods, the District of Columbia government, as well as state and federal agencies, addressing planning concerns in the city that he loved. In 2003 he received the George Washington Award, one of the highest honors given by the George Washington University to recognize extraordinary service to the university and the community.

In the classroom, Professor McGrath engaged students in hands-on research that addressed local urban needs. Oftentimes his class projects were actual planning issues brought to him by local planners. His students tackled questions such as where an airport should be located, how a city’s public transportation needs could be met, or how to select and designate historic sites? His cross-listed multidisciplinary class “Building Cities” inspired many undergraduates to attend graduate programs in planning. His extensive slide collection of cities from around the world was a signature tool used in each lecture. He once remarked to his colleague Marie Price that, “I’ve never given the same lecture twice.” He trained hundreds of students about the art and craft of urban planning and supervised 65 Masters theses at GWU.

Dorn McGrath was a constructive interventionist who believed that scholars were obligated to engage in real-world problems and effect positive change in their communities. He actively worked in and sought to improve the historical, geographical and functional aspects of how the Washington Metropolitan region looks and works. He did this most directly through leadership roles in various research and advisory bodies. He
was President of the American Institute of Planners (1971-73) and Chairman of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City (1987-96), an influential body made up of planners, architects, politicians and concerned citizens who regularly testify before Congress and review plans put forward by the City Council and the National Capital Planning Commission. He also served on the Anacostia Coordinating Council, 1984-1994 to preserve some of its historic buildings and improve community services. He was appointed by Mayor Williams to Chair an Advisory Panel to the DC City Council on Solid Waste Transfer Facility Sites (1999-2003). On September 13, 2013 he was recognized for his work in Anacostia by the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum with John R. Kinard Leadership in Community Service Award at a luncheon held at the National Press Club.

As a planner he knew that urban spaces work best through careful planning and continual oversight. It is this spirit that shaped his life’s work at the George Washington University and in the nation’s capital. Whether they knew him or not, most residents in the Washington Area have been impacted by the work of Dorn McGrath and his students, many of whom are employed by planning agencies in Metropolitan Washington. Beyond the beltway, Dorn McGrath was a national figure among professional planners having been elected to the College of Fellows, American Institute of Certified Planners in 2003.

In May 2013 the Department of Geography created the Dorn C. McGrath, Jr. Award to recognize outstanding scholarship by a graduate student in the Department of Geography. In 2015, the Department established the Dorn C. McGrath, Jr. Lecture Fund to support an annual lecture by a prominent urban planner or geographer. Dorn and his daughter Martha were able to attend several of these lectures as well as many alumni who studied with Professor McGrath. The annual spring lecture honors the contributions of Professor Dorn C. McGrath, Jr. and ensures a high-level discussion about planning innovations and best practices in urban areas. Plans are in the works for a virtual McGrath Lecture in 2021. If you would like to contribute to the Dorn C. McGrath, Jr. Lecture Fund, please visit go.gwu.edu/dornmcgrathfund.

All of us who have worked with Dorn benefited from his good humor, his insights and generosity. He invested energy and warmth in supporting his colleagues. Marie Price, who took over as Chair from Prof. McGrath notes “he was always the first person I called when I hit a roadblock and needed advice or a laugh. Even in retirement, he was a welcomed and regular dinner guest in my home.”

“Dorn was a wonderful mentor who urged me to get to know fellow faculty with similar research interests and to join CCAS and university-wide committees. He even graciously provided feedback on research proposals. He was a story-teller par excellence, a quality admired by his students and colleagues alike as he wove tales of DC politics into lectures and conversations in his inimitable witty style,” says Elizabeth Chacko, who was
hired by Prof. McGrath in 1998 and served as chair of the Geography department for six
years. Lisa Benton-Short, currently the Department Chair, recalls: “When I first arrived at
GW in 2001 as a new faculty member, Dorn took me to lunches, lectures and events around
campus and around town, introducing me to important people in the Washington D.C.
planning circles. He graciously gave me access to his 35-years-plus collection of planning
documents, papers, maps, and, best of all, tremendous wisdom”. With his late wife, Lee
McGrath, Geography faculty were welcomed into their home for festive holiday parties and
celebrations. We knew him as someone who cared deeply about the capital city, his
colleagues and his students. Perhaps former Washington DC Mayor Anthony Williams said
it best when he referred to Dorn as the “conscience of the city”.