

Mourning the loss of mentor Jim McConkey



Cornell Author and Professor Emeritus James McConkey at a celebration of his 95th birthday in Ithaca, New York.

It's not every freshman writing instructor who stays in touch with a student for more than 50 years, but Cornell University Professor Emeritus James McConkey was one who did...and I was the lucky student.

McConkey was my freshman writing instructor in 1967—I used to go out to his farm to exercise his horses—and he helped me through the student takeover of Willard Straight Hall, from which 130 black protestors emerged—several of whom brandished rifles.

(Jim told me recently that he sat with Dan Berrigan during the

Barton Hall Takeover; also counselled University President Perkins—and tried to be a voice of reason throughout all of that). We stayed in touch for some 50 years; he and I held a joint book-signing in the Cornell Store during my 45th college reunion.

I am glad I got to see him just before he passed away.

In early October, Jim, his son Larry and daughter-in-law Diane McConkey were on their way back from visiting another of Jim's former students on Northern Maine (some 9 hours from Ithaca) and invited me to dinner at the Publick House, near Cambridge, where I live, and where they were spending the night.

At 98, he told a few funny stories about his mother, who lived to 100 at least...and I joked that his social life was better than mine. He was still driving—and told us that he would be driving the ten miles from his farm to lunch with friends several times the next week. He seemed frail—but sounded fine when I called to thank him a few days after our dinner.

Anyway, I've posted an obit Larry wrote at <http://ithacadiaries.com>. The Cornell obit is at <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2019/10/writer-emeritus-professor-james-mcconkey-dies-98>. And here's a link to tributes from Diane Ackerman, Brad Edmonson and Robert Wilson that appeared in the American Scholar. <https://theamericanscholar.org/remembering-james-mcconkey/#.XdMM6ldKg2w>. —

—Anita M. Harris

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Pennsylvania, during the trial of the Harrisburg 8.