
Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Madison On the Death of Professor Emeritus Seymour Abrahamson

Professor Emeritus Seymour Abrahamson died in Madison on Saturday, July 23, 2016 at the age of 88. Born in New York City on Nov. 28, 1927, Seymour joined the UW-Madison faculty in 1961. Seymour taught courses in Zoology and Genetics. He was recognized by his students as an outstanding teacher. Seymour was especially proud of his contributions to Introductory Zoology (Zoo 101/2). His ability to administer the large team involved in teaching that course, combined with his ability to communicate effectively with the vast number of students who passed through these gateway classes brought him satisfaction. Seymour also took great pleasure in teaching the Undergraduate Honors course in the Zoology Department.

Seymour's research interests were in the genetic effects of radiation and of chemicals, both by direct experimentation and by studying and analyzing data. Seymour's careful work on the effects of ionizing radiation on chromosomes in germ cells in *Drosophila* made major contributions to our understanding of how radiation results in stable, heritable changes in DNA, and what environmental conditions sensitize cells for DNA damage. A major intellectual influence for Seymour was his Ph.D. advisor at the University of Indiana, Herman J. Muller, the Nobel Laureate who first demonstrated, using *Drosophila*, that radiation is mutagenic, a discovery that opened up a new era in genetics. Seymour counted the distinguished population geneticist Dr. James F. Crow among his closest friends and greatest mentors at UW-Madison.

Seymour's work extended beyond *Drosophila*, however. He also made significant contributions to understanding how radiation damages human DNA. Seymour lectured widely across the United States, Europe and Asia, publishing over 100 articles and book chapters in peer-reviewed scientific journals dealing with health, physics and radiation. Seymour's expertise in environmental mutagenesis — and especially in radiation mutagenesis — placed him among an elite group of scientists who were consulted when emergencies arose concerning public health. He was, for example, one of the expert consultants called to action in 1979 when the Three Mile Island nuclear accident occurred. Seymour was long affiliated with the Hiroshima-based Radiation Effects Research Foundation (RERF) (formerly known as the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission), a joint project of the Japanese and U.S. Governments, where he helped oversee and publish studies on the effects of the atomic bombs on human survivors. He lived and worked in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, for seven years, and served as Director and Chief of Research for RERF from 1986 to 1988 (and again in a leadership capacity from 1995 to 1996). In recognition of his contributions to science and the Japanese people, Dr. Abrahamson received a distinguished service award from the Emperor of Japan.

Seymour was the recipient of many honors, was a member of numerous professional societies, and served on numerous professional boards and committees on the state, national and international stage. He participated on the editorial boards of several professional publications, and served as Editor-in-Chief of *Environmental Mutagenesis* from 1979 to 1984. His service included work for the National Academy of Sciences, the National Council on Radiation Protection, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the Environmental Protection Agency, Brookhaven National Laboratory, Argonne National Laboratory, and the Institute of Regulatory Sciences. Seymour was particularly proud of his wide-ranging committee work in service to the people of the State of Wisconsin and its University.

Seymour's career was distinguished, but few may be aware of the obstacles that Seymour overcame en route to such a remarkable life. Midway through his career Seymour was involved in a car accident that put him in the hospital with a serious leg injury that would leave him permanently disabled. Such an obstacle may have been too much for lesser men, but not for Seymour. While in his hospital bed, days after his accident, Seymour reviewed a PhD student's thesis. When it came time for the student's thesis defense, Seymour hosted the meeting in his hospital room. Such passion for his work, including students, was a hallmark of Seymour's career.

Seymour served twice as Chair of the Zoology Department. As Department Chair, Seymour was tireless in supporting his faculty. Besides keeping up with the progress of individual projects, he would also give each faculty member a backrub. Seymour was a man with both head and heart.

Seymour's passion for people and learning was lifelong. After retirement, Seymour remained committed to keeping abreast of new developments in biological research and the environment. He was a stalwart of the Zoology Evolution Reading Group for many years.

Seymour was a remarkable colleague, but he was part of an equally remarkable family. Seymour is survived by his wife and life partner, Shirley Abrahamson, long-time Chief Justice and current Justice of the Supreme Court of Wisconsin; son, Daniel and daughter-in-law, Tsan; grandson, Moses Jonah; and nephews and great-nieces and great-nephews, all of whom he cherished.

Seymour's *joie-de-vivre* and his playful sense of discovery will be deeply missed. We are privileged and grateful to have had Seymour as a friend and colleague.

MEMORIAL COMMITTEE

Millard Susman, Rayla Temin, Antony Stretton, and Jeff Hardin (chair of Zoology)