



## IN MEMORIAM

Orville Thompson

Professor Emeritus of Community Studies and Development  
Department of Human and Community Development  
UC Davis  
1919 – 2006

With the passing of Orville Thompson from complications of a stroke on October 6, 2006, UC Davis has lost a person dedicated to the university and the larger community within which it is embedded. He was a leading advocate for undergraduate education and student involvement in the community. His dedication to students and the land grant mission were undoubtedly drawn from his humble roots in the Montana prairie town of Union where he was born on Aug. 26, 1919. His educational career epitomized the experiences of what some have called “America’s Greatest Generation.” Following four years of naval duty in the Pacific during World War II, he returned to his home state, and utilizing the GI Bill by obtaining a bachelor's degree in agricultural education in 1948 from Montana State University. In 1952, he received a master’s in education from UC Davis. In 1954, he was awarded a doctorate degree from Cornell University with studies in education, rural sociology and educational psychology. He then returned to UC Davis to begin a 34- year faculty career distinguished by the many student lives he enriched as teacher, mentor, and adviser by creating unique academic programs in education and the behavioral sciences.

From 1954 until his retirement in 1988 and then afterwards as an emeriti, Thompson was a model for excellence in education. His commitment is exemplified by the large number of students he affected and encouraged. He lived by the motto that, “You will achieve much more in life through your influence on others than through what you do as an individual.” His dedication to students was legendary.

During the tumultuous 1960s, given Thompson's leadership and his ability to inspire students, he was chosen to lead the newly created Department of Applied Behavioral Science in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences. That department eventually evolved into the Department of Human and Community Development. Orville saw Applied Behavioral Sciences (ABS) as a place for research and teaching that had a positive impact on the greater society. ABS also served as an incubator for UC Davis’ ethnic studies programs, what is now Design and Landscape Architecture. This was just one example of how he implemented his belief that the university must help address the social issues of the day.

Thompson was an educational innovator and believed that a student’s experience should include community involvement. For example, he originated an annual weeklong field studies experience in San Francisco’s inner city to study poverty programs. He also conceptualized the staff undergraduate advisor position and directed the beginning of the Campus Internship and Career Center.

His dedication to community was not limited to academic. He was actively involved in the City of Davis civic life. He was a life- long member of the Davis Kiwanis Club, beginning in 1958 and serving as its president in 1979. He served the city of Davis on a variety of civic committees, was foreman of the Yolo County Grand Jury in 1986-1987, was a member of the County Fair board 1980-84, and a member and chair of the Yolo

County Manpower Advisory and Planning Council in 1978-83. Beginning in 1980, for a number of years, he chaired the Yolo County Cal Aggie Alumni Scholarship Committee. A special interest was the local chapter of his Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity, which he served as an adviser in his early years on campus and later as a lifetime member and leader of its alumni board.

Orville and Erna, his wife of 60 years, have been generous benefactors of many local nonprofit organizations, such as International House and the Yolo Hospice, and they gave freely of personal service. He was an energetic and productive fund-raiser for a variety of interests, both on and off campus. He was a leader of successful fund drives for International House and for the UC Davis Alumni and Visitors Center, in which the International Visitors Center is named for the Thompson's. The Thompson's have also established an endowment to support students in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences. In 2003, the UC Davis campus expressed its respect for his distinguished service and appreciation for his generosity by naming one of its new dormitories after him. Yet, of all of the high awards and recognition he received, the most gratifying was having the students choose him and Erna as the Picnic Day Grand Marshals in 1993.

Orville will be remembered for the optimism and encouragement he gave to his students and his dedication to UC Davis. Even years after retiring, he would come to campus and bring flowers and doughnuts to the departmental staff. The Department of Human and Community Development, the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, and UC Davis were enhanced by his tireless dedication and commitment. He gave much to the students and university, and he repeatedly stated he was gratified by how much love was returned to him. He made a difference.

He is survived by his wife, Erna; his nephew, Tom Larson; his great-nephews, Scott Jensen and Todd Larson; and his great-niece, Mary Larson.

Larry Harper  
Martin Kenney  
Michael Smith