

Seymour Sarason Obituary  
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Psychologists and educators across the world mourn the death of a visionary giant in both fields and a beloved mentor, Seymour B. Sarason, professor emeritus of psychology at Yale University. He died on Thursday, January 28, 2010 at age 91 in New Haven.

Called father of community psychology, dean of educational reform, and ground-breaking leader in the field of mental retardation, Sarason joined the Yale faculty in 1945 and taught generations of students for five decades until his retirement in 1989. At that time, his work was celebrated in a special issue of the *American Journal of Community Psychology* (1990, volume 3). Enormously prolific, he published 45 books and 66 articles in diverse fields impacting human development (see <http://seymoursarason.com>). His last book *Centers for Endings: The Coming Crisis in the Care of Aged People* written about his experiences in residential care communities, will be published this year

In *Psychology in Community Settings* (1966) co-authored with Levine, Goldenberg, Cherlin, and Bennett, Professor Sarason defined the field of community psychology. Written about the Yale Psycho-Educational Clinic, which he founded and directed from 1961-1970, this work ushered in a paradigm shift for clinical psychology, engendering much controversy.

Earlier an expert in mental retardation and atypical development (*Psychological Problems in Mental Deficiency* now in its fourth edition, 1969), test anxiety (*Anxiety in Elementary School Children* 1960), and projective tests (*The Clinical Interaction* 1954), Sarason turned away from commonly held assumptions. He urged psychology to partner with education, instead of medicine and the medical model (*Psychology Misdirected* 1981; *American Psychology & Schools* 2001). He shifted thinking from deficit analysis to nurturing potential, from treatment to

prevention, from seeing problems in individuals to the role of social settings, from expert to collaborative partner, and from individual change to social change.

With remarkably vivid examples, Professor Sarason gave us a conceptual frame and language for understanding the qualities of social settings that hinder human development and the challenges that confront social and institutional change, sensitive to historical context (*The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* printed in 1971, 1982, and 1996). Sarason opened new lines of study, such in *The Creation of Settings and Future Societies* in 1972, *The Psychological Sense of Community: Prospects for a Community Psychology* in 1974, and *Human Services and Resource Networks* in 1977. And he called us to social action in schools, in communities, and in society at large.

An incisive critic of educational reform, Sarason's contributions remain seminal. School culture, productive learning, teacher preparation, political governance, parent involvement, and charter schools are among the issues he addressed with clarity and wisdom in too many books to name here. He spoke his mind freely, issuing *Letters to a Serious Education President* twice in 1993 and 2006. His most recent collaboration was with physicist Stanislaw Glazek in a book called *Productive Learning: Science, Art, and Einsteins Relativity in Educational Reform* published in 2007.

His books were classics and read like novels, as he was a keen social critic who wrote fully in his own voice. He published his autobiography in 1988 (*The Making of an American Psychologist*) and a novel *St. James and Goldstein at Yale* in 2005.

Beyond the remarkable legacy left in his written work is the impact he had on his students, his colleagues, a community of individuals who sought his counsel until his dying days, and a legion of schools and programs that benefited from his analysis – across the country and worldwide. With his

door always open, his stance ever welcoming, Sarason created that context for productive learning about which he wrote. And all who came into contact with him learned beyond their imagination, put into action programs that developed human potential, and fell in love with his kind and caring ways.

Sarason earned his undergraduate degree from Rutgers (then the University of Newark) in 1939. His Ph.D. in clinical psychology was awarded from Clark University in 1942. Among many honors, Professor Sarason was the recipient of three honorary degrees and six distinguished contributions awards, including Distinguished Contributions to Community Psychology (Society for Community Research and Action [SCRA]) and the Lifetime Contribution to the Public Interest Gold Medal from the American Psychological Foundation. The Seymour B. Sarason Award for Community Research and Action was established in 1993 by SCRA and the American Psychological Association to recognise individuals working in the conceptually demanding, creative, and groundbreaking tradition of Sarason.

His wife of 50 years, Esther Kroop Sarason predeceased him in 1993. He leaves a daughter Julie Sarason, her husband Paul Feuerstein, a grandson Nathaniel, a brother Irwin Sarason and sister-in-law Barbara, a brother-in-law Dr. Irving Kroop and wife Eugenia, and companion Irma Janoff Miller.