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RICHARD N. WHITE

1933–2009

Elected in 1992

“For advancing understanding of the behavior of structures, for innovations in engineering education, and for leadership in concrete technology.”

BY WILLIAM McGUIRE

RICHARD NORMAN WHITE, James A. Friend Family Distinguished Professor of Engineering at the Cornell University School of Civil and Environmental Engineering, died on October 3, 2009.

Dick was born on December 21, 1933, in Chetek, Wisconsin, and grew up on several different dairy farms. His father alternated farm ownership with operation of a small contracting firm. Work on the farms, helping his father in construction, and his classroom interests made civil engineering Dick’s clear choice while still in high school.

He received his civil engineering education at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, earning his B.S. in 1956 and M.S. in 1957. Then, after six months of active duty service in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, he returned to the University of Wisconsin to study for his Ph.D., which he received in 1961. While studying for the doctorate he worked part time as a structural engineer for a consulting firm and served as an instructor at the university, with responsibility for several undergraduate courses. As an undergraduate he had met Margaret Howell, also a student at the university. They were married in 1957, and Marge completed her undergraduate program while he worked on his doctorate. These formative years were the firm base for his later career and his accomplishments as a

teacher, a writer, an administrator, a professional leader, and a community servant.

In 1961, Dick joined the Cornell University School of Civil and Environmental Engineering faculty as an assistant professor. He was soon recognized as an exceptional teacher, winning the engineering college's Outstanding Teacher Award in 1965—a promise to be confirmed in later years by the same award in 1996 and as a three-time winner of civil engineering's Chi Epsilon Award. He was also the lead author of the White, Gergely, and Sexsmith three-volume set of textbooks *Structural Engineering* (New York: Wiley, 1972), which integrated aspects of mechanics, analysis, behavior, materials, and design. It was widely successful and had a broad influence on undergraduate education in civil engineering. As his research interests started to lean toward concrete structures and the need to appreciate their physical behavior, Dick conceived, designed, and built a structural models laboratory for instruction and research in concrete systems. It, too, had a successful history and has recently been succeeded by a 21st-century facility founded on the same principles and named in his honor as the Richard N. White Instructional Laboratory.

As is almost inevitable in academia, a person of Dick's talent and vision is drawn into administration. Dick had several appointments. One of the most influential was that of director of the School of Civil and Environmental Engineering from 1978 to 1984. His most outwardly visible accomplishment was in the physical plant. When he came into office, the hydraulics research laboratory was small and inadequately equipped. The need for improvement was clear. Dick took the lead in planning, fund-raising, and construction of a 5,000-square-foot addition to the engineering school's building, a facility that was completed in 1983 and named the Joseph H. DeFrees Hydraulic Laboratory in honor of its major donor. Dick was also an efficient manager of the day-to-day affairs of the engineering school.

In these and his other administrative roles what came across most memorably was the nature of the man himself. As colleagues said in recording and reflecting on Dick's many

accomplishments and the awards and recognition he received throughout his career: “We particularly acknowledge the statesmanlike . . . he performed as a distinguished member of the Cornell University faculty—a role that infused and yet transcended his specific area of research and which demonstrated his personal warmth, knowledge, compassion and commitment to students, staff and faculty in Civil Engineering and in every aspect of the University in which he participated. Dick was uniformly admired and respected.”

Beyond the university, Dick was active nationally in professional affairs, most notably with the American Concrete Institute. From his initial membership in the 1950s to a term as president in 1997, he was active at all levels of the institute. He was on numerous technical committees and at various times was chairman of the Technical Activities Committee and the Standards Board and a member of the Board of Directors. He also received the institute’s Joe W. Kelly Award for leadership in education in 1992, the Wason Medal for Most Meritorious Paper in 1993, and honorary membership in 2006.

Dick also maintained a part-time consulting practice. In the course of his career he advised dozens of organizations—structural engineering firms, manufacturers, national laboratories, government agencies, universities, and publishers—on a variety of topics, such as structural analysis design and research, project evaluation, and editorial policy.

In 1988, Dick was named James A. Friend Family Distinguished Professor of Engineering at Cornell. He was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1992 and to honorary membership in the American Society of Civil Engineers in 2001.

He started to receive widespread recognition for his writing, research, and professional activity while still in his 30s. Until he was incapacitated by illness in 2005, he was in demand off-campus as a lecturer, ambassador of the American Concrete Institute, and venerated mentor of foreign graduate students.

Dick and Marge enjoyed travel and the associated opportunities to meet people, and his professional travel

plus sabbatical leaves from Cornell enabled them to see and experience many places. He had terms as a visiting professor at the universities of California at Berkeley, Puerto Rico at Mayaguez, Durham, and Southwestern Jiaotong. Other engagements covered much of the civil engineering worlds of Latin America, China, the Middle East, and Northern Africa.

Dick was an outstanding photographer. He always carried a camera on trips, recording the scenery, people, foods, and life wherever he was. He particularly enjoyed taking pictures of birds, animals, and flowers. His work was shown extensively, both in group exhibitions and one-man shows.

Locally, the White's first real Ithaca home, in the Ellis Hollow section, was a Tech-Built house finished off by Dick and his father. In the years they lived there, Dick and Marge were leaders in the community, cochairs of the 25th Anniversary Ellis Hollow Fair, and hosts of many gatherings of neighbors and colleagues featuring fine food and wine.

Dick suffered the first of two strokes when he was 72 and he died four years later. He was denied gentle twilight years. But he was remarkably successful in everything he undertook, and the legacy of his good work remains.

He is survived by his wife, Margaret; daughter, Barbara Ann Shaffer (William) (of Arlington, Virginia); granddaughter, Natalie Apseloff; grandson, Nicholas Apseloff; son, David Charles White (fiancee, Soeung Brenda Oeun) and children, Kuyheang Sok, Layheang Sok, Mary Sok, Andy Sok, and Michael Daniel Oeun (of Ithaca, New York); a beloved sister, Joyce Mortt (of Eau Claire, Wisconsin); three nieces, Susan Nelson (Mike), Madelyn, and Cynthia Lamb (J. P. Bowersock), and sons, Eli and Oliver; and Jennifer (Mark) Johnson and son, Peter; brothers-in-law Charles Howell (Mary) and Robert Howell (Kathy); a niece, Kim Dutter (Roy) and her children, Mathew, Kailey, and Kasey; and a nephew, Dan Howell, and his sons, Jacob and Jeremy.

