

In Memoriam

Donald N. Bersoff (1939-2024)



Donald N. Bersoff, Ph.D, J.D., who provided a foundational influence on the development of American law-psychology and served as the 2013 president of the American Psychological Association, died on March 26, 2024.

Don had a long and meaningful career as a psychologist and a lawyer. These were not separate for him. As well as anyone we have known, he succeeded in integrating the two in his scholarship, teaching, practice, and service. His interests in legal rights such as privacy and access, and in ethical dilemmas in the practice of psychology, served as bridges connecting the two fields. He passed along this valuable perspective to generations of students and colleagues, who gained a clearer appreciation for the application of ethics, a greater understanding of how scientific research can inform the law, and an enhanced awareness of how our shared humanity can (and should) affect our values and our lives.

Born and raised in New York, Don did his undergraduate work and doctoral training at New York University, where his mentors included Bernie Kalinkowitz, Gil Trachtman and Florence Halpern. He served his country as a psychologist in the Air Force for three years after completing his doctoral training, including two years in Southeast Asia. He subsequently held faculty positions at Ohio State University and the University of Georgia. During this time, his growing interest in the law led him to seek formal legal training at Yale University, where he received his JD in 1976.

His pioneering spirit was apparent in his next position: founding director of one of the early psychology and law programs at Johns Hopkins (psychology) and

the University of Maryland (law). It was during this period that the specialty area of law-psychology was moving from “great interest but little available formal training” to the next stage, with the Hopkins-Maryland program demonstrating what could be developed with a motivated and knowledgeable leader at the helm.

Don next assumed the inaugural position of APA general counsel. He was ideal for this position due to work as an attorney informed by psychology. He then founded a boutique law firm in Washington, DC (Ennis, Friedman, and Bersoff), with APA the firm’s biggest client. Ennis, Friedman and Bersoff subsequently merged with the Washington office of the Chicago-based firm Jenner and Block. Don remained APA general counsel for a decade (1979-1989), sharpening his legal practice skills and overseeing the submission of *amicus curiae* briefs to the United States Supreme Court, federal appellate courts, and state appellate courts. These “friend of the court” briefs provided courts with social science evidence on topics such as jury decision-making, sex stereotyping, privacy and reproductive rights, hospital privileges for psychologists, psychologists as experts in legal proceedings, children’s testimony, and rights of the severely mentally disabled. It would be hard to imagine a practicing attorney with a greater understanding of and appreciation for the scientific and professional issues that were being litigated in these cases. Many included topics on which he had conducted research and scholarly reviews as a psychologist, with this experience providing a very distinctive perspective on behavioral science research and its role in the law. This is a remarkable contribution at the highest level of the United States legal system, and the court decisions that relied on Don’s amicus briefs have positively affected millions of lives.

But one of Don’s greatest interests was in training psychologist-lawyers who would make meaningful contributions to either field. After a decade as APA general counsel, he was recruited to direct the law-psychology program at Hahnemann University and Villanova School of Law. This was a particularly challenging position, as the Hahnemann psychology faculty had moved *en masse* to another university, leaving Hahnemann to recruit their replacements and complete the training of their graduate students. Don accepted the challenge and provided exemplary leadership, allowing the program to continue. There were other challenges to come—Hahnemann merged with the Medical College of Pennsylvania, then with Drexel—but the program that Don began to lead in 1989 still remains intact. Few in our field could have pulled that off.

Throughout his long and distinguished academic career, which spanned several decades, Don was regarded by students and colleagues as knowledgeable, kind, patient, and generous with his time (of which he had little) and wisdom (of which he had a lot). Scores of students viewed Don as a role model, inspired leader, and “father figure” who was a tireless champion for his students. Colleagues often described him as warm and caring, and as someone who embraced the “elder statesman’s” role later in his career. Don’s advancement of integrated psychology-law training and his ability to inspire greatness are evident among his many former students who have become passionate contributors to the psychology-law field. It is not hyperbolic to say that generations of psychology-law scholars, researchers, and practitioners owe their professional lives to Don.

Don’s commitment to the field included a heavy emphasis on professional service. An APA Fellow and ABPP diplomate, he variously served on the APA Council of Representatives (for three terms), Board of Directors, and as president of the American Psychology-Law Society/APA Division 41. His efforts to promote psychology included work with organizations such as the American Bar Association, National Academy of Sciences, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Society for Research in Child Development, and the National Commission on the Protection of Human Subjects.

His many efforts and achievements over the years were recognized by awards including the 2000 APA Presidential Citation for Distinguished Service to APA; Distinguished Contributions to Psychology as a Science and Profession and Ethics Educator of the Year from the Pennsylvania Psychological Association; the Arthur Furst Ethics Award from the Pacific Graduate School of Psychology; and the Lifetime Contribution Award from the American Psychology-Law Society. Given his lengthy commitment to APA, he was fittingly elected president of the American Psychological Association for 2013; two of the major themes of his presidency involved service to those serving (past or present) in the military and promoting diversity within the ranks of psychology.

He published widely as a scholar, researcher, and critic. Perhaps his greatest contribution in this regard is his oft-cited ethics textbook (*Ethical Conflicts in Psychology*, APA Press, in 4 editions), probably known to anyone who has ever taught or taken an ethics course in law-psychology. Even with all these professional accomplishments, knowing Don as we do, we expect that he would see his most meaningful recognition as the gratitude of the many

students he has trained, colleagues with whom he has consulted, and organizations that have been improved through his work.

He is survived by his wife, Deborah Leavy; children David, Judith Davis, and Benjamin; granddaughter Aubrey Davis; and brother Edward. He had a long and meaningful career. He trained generations of students, consulted with and served as a model for faculty and professional colleagues, and helped make organizations such as the American Psychological Association and the American Psychology-Law Society better for all of us. Don lived an extraordinary life that touched many and left the world a better place. We will miss him.

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David DeMatteo
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