

## **Thomas Anthony Lyson**

January 30, 1948 – December 28, 2006

Thomas Anthony Lyson, the Liberty Hyde Bailey Professor of Development Sociology at Cornell University, died on December 28, 2006 of cancer. He was born in Oak Park, Illinois. His father died when he was eight years old. He and his mother later moved to West Virginia, where he attended high school. He earned his B.A. (1970) and M.S. (1972) degrees in Sociology from West Virginia University (WVU). As a graduate student research assistant at WVU, he traveled the back roads of Appalachia where he saw poverty and privation firsthand. When his major professor was recruited to Michigan State University, Lyson followed him there for his Ph.D. degree (1976). After working for a short time for the Michigan Department of Labor, he took a position in the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics at Clemson University, where he progressed through the ranks from Assistant Professor to Associate Professor. He came to Cornell in January 1987, and was promoted to Associate Professor in 1989, Professor in 1992, and Liberty Hyde Bailey Professor in February of 2000.

Professor Lyson's career can be divided into four eras, each reflecting with different emphases his concerns about social justice, democracy, and economic opportunity. He began his sociological career with a primary focus on youth, undertaking studies that led to articles on education, migration, career planning and job opportunities among young people of rural backgrounds, as well as gender differences on these topics.

He then turned to a focus on the structure of economic opportunities, especially in rural areas. From this work came numerous journal articles on topics that include the impacts of industrial changes by gender and location, as well as a series of books that include the following titles:

High Tech, Low Tech, No Tech: Recent Occupational and Industrial Changes in the South [with William Falk, 1988]; Two Sides to the Sunbelt: The Growing Divergence Between the Rural and Urban South [1989]; Rural Sociology and Development: Rural Labor Markets [edited with W. Falk, 1989]; Forgotten Places: Uneven Development and the Loss of Opportunity in Rural America [edited with W. Falk, 1993].

When Professor Lyson joined the Cornell faculty, the changing structure of agriculture and its implications became his central interest. Building on his earlier studies of the public's views on farming and of entry into farming, he turned his attention to topics like how technological changes and sectoral concentration affected both the dairy industry and agricultural sustainability. In addition to numerous journal articles from this work, he edited two related volumes, Rural Sociology and Development: Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Communities [with H. Schwarzweller, 1995] and Under the Blade: The Conversion of Agricultural Landscapes [with R. Olson, 1998].

Professor Lyson's fourth era was characterized by the confluence of his interest in economic opportunities and sustainable agriculture. From this emerged his conception of civic agriculture. Here he brought together work from his two previous eras and incorporated the applied work in the Farming Alternatives Program (later renamed the Community, Food, and Agriculture Program). Under his directorship (beginning in the early 1990s), the program shifted its focus from agricultural entrepreneurship to "food and agriculture based community development," i.e., the positive development impacts of independent farms and businesses run by people with an interest in and commitment to their communities. Under Lyson's leadership, the program modeled the Cornell land grant mission, combining research, outreach, and teaching to creatively engage rural needs in an age of globalization. This era yielded co-authored articles with titles like "Local Capitalism, Civic Engagement, and Socioeconomic Well-Being" [1998] and "Civil Society and Agricultural Sustainability" [1998] as well as his last two books:

Civic Agriculture: Reconnecting Farm, Food and Community [2004] and Remaking the North American Food System [edited with C. Hinrichs, forthcoming].

Another era would surely have emerged from Professor Lyson's growing interest in the health implications of food systems and community organization. Papers presented at recent conferences included titles like "Agricultural Chemical Use, Low Birth Weight Babies and Infant Mortality: A Study of Agricultural Counties in the U.S." and a session organized at the 2005 American Sociological Association meeting was titled: "Gentrification, Segregation, and Health: Community Processes for the 21st Century."

Professionally, Professor Lyson was active in the American Sociological Association, the Rural Sociological Society, and the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society. As editor of Rural Sociology from 1996-99, he guided the journal to reflect the increasing range of methodological orientations and topics investigated by the membership of the Rural Sociological Society.

Professor Lyson took his teaching and student mentoring very seriously. His graduate and undergraduate courses were very popular. In his courses and his advising, he challenged students to be "big thinkers." He encouraged theoretical thinking and did this in a way that left students feeling inspired and motivated. He was highly supportive of his graduate students, including actively helping them to generate opportunities to follow their interests and passions, publish papers, and participate in professional meetings.

Though a private person, Professor Lyson's active engagement in public life reflected his sociological interests and passions. He supported grassroots sustainable agriculture groups through generously giving his time and talents as an advisor and a speaker. His "go-for-it" attitude and irrepressible confidence inspired grassroots citizens to act together to realize their dreams and passions. Messages of condolences after his death commonly included comments to the effect that he had helped the writers to accomplish what they themselves wanted to do. In the small village

of Freeville, New York, where he lived during his tenure at Cornell, he served the village government in a variety of capacities, including as a member of the zoning board and as Mayor for two terms. He was a leader of a successful campaign to retain the village's elementary school after the school district proposed closing it.

His widow, Loretta Carrillo, daughters, Mercedes and Helena, and numerous current and former graduate students survive Professor Lyson.

*Gilbert Gillespie, Chair; Charles Geisler, Philip McMichael  
(with acknowledgements to William Falk)*