

Former UCSC professor Norman O. Brown dead at 89

By JONDI GUMZ
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Norman O. Brown, a charismatic lecturer and counterculture hero who inspired his colleagues and thousands of students for more than a decade at UC Santa Cruz, died Wednesday at the age of 89.

He had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease three years ago.

He was not a physically dominating presence, but intellectually he was a giant. Yet he always was interested in other people, whether they were academics or laborers.

Remarkably, even after he was unable to write or speak, "He would seek out and engage others with his eyes and with physical contact," his son, Tom Brown, said.

Jerome Neu, a philosophy professor at UCSC and longtime colleague of Brown, called him "a visionary scholar, the successor in the 20th century to Blake and Nietzsche."

Literature professor Helene Moglen said, "His work, starting with 'Life against Death' helped to form a generation in the '60s and '70s."

Critics called his books provocative.

In "Love's Body," published in 1966 and recognized as a classic, he wrote, "Freedom is poetry, taking liberties with words, breaking the rules of normal speech, violating common sense. Freedom is violence."

The university plans a public celebration of Brown's life at 3 p.m. Oct. 19 at the Oakes College Learning Center.

Born in Mexico, the son of a mining engineer, Brown was educated at Oxford University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Wisconsin, where he earned a doctorate in 1942. During World War II, he was an analyst with the

Office of Strategic Services.

He taught classics at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, then at the University of Rochester. He came to UCSC in 1968 at the invitation of Page Smith, the first provost of Cowell College.

Everyone knew him as "Nobby," a nickname based on his initials.

He had repudiated England as a young man, turning down a prestigious fellowship at All Souls College to come to America because it was the land of poet Walt Whitman.

In UCSC, he saw the prospect for a more democratic education, said Hayden White, a longtime professor of history of consciousness who met Brown in Rochester in 1961.

"I learned from him the value of poetry," White said.

Brown hunted mushrooms with avant-garde composer John Cage and loved to walk, strolling through Wilder Ranch, Pogonip and Nisene Marks while talking with colleagues.

"Most of us got to know him best on walks," said Moglen, who worked closely with him when she was dean of humanities. "He was always up for a new place."

His appointment was unique because he wasn't assigned to a particular department.

"He could do whatever he pleased in any department, and he did," said Neu, who knew Brown for 30 years.

He did things no one else did.

He gave lectures on Islam and the Koran.

He co-taught a one-of-a-kind seminar for faculty on Goethe's "Faust." with Princeton professor Carl Schorske.

He organized a wake for "Finnegan's Wake," the James Joyce classic.

"It wasn't a class, it was more like a happening — magical, wonderful stuff," Neu said.

Norman Brown

BORN: 1913 in Mexico.

DIED: Oct. 2, 2002, in Santa Cruz.

EDUCATION: Trained in classics at Oxford University, doctorate in classics at the University of Wisconsin.

OCCUPATION: Retired professor, author.

SURVIVORS: Wife of 64 years, Elizabeth P. Brown; sons Stephen and Thomas; daughters Rebecca and Susan; grandsons Alex Brown and Jeremy Gussin; and granddaughters Lisa Brown, Meika Scott-Brown and Sara Gussin.

SERVICES: Oct. 19 at 3 p.m., Oakes College Learning Center.

Students packed the classroom when he spoke.

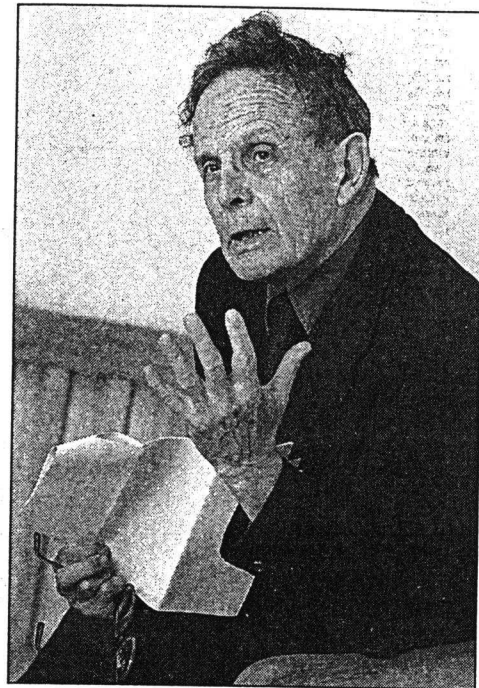
"He was a mesmerizing sort of guru, but he didn't much care for disciples," Neu said. "He wanted people to be themselves, only better."

Brown was an insatiable reader who saw connections others didn't. His mind moved at warp speed. He always was asking questions, pushing his colleagues and students to pose questions, too.

"Nobby's hobby was thinking," said Moglen, recalling how he reacted after reading her essay on Toni Morrison's "Beloved."

"He started where I started but where he wound up was in so many other places associatively," she said. "It was a wonderful conversation. It made me feel enormously excited about the possibilities."

Brown's students included Jay Cantor, who came to UCSC to work on a doctorate in 1972 and won a MacArthur "genius" fellowship in 1989.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file photo

Norman Brown reads from one of his essays to a gathering celebrating his latest book in June of 1991.

"I never stopped studying with him," said Cantor, 54, a novelist who teaches at Tufts University.

The two kept in touch after Cantor got his doctorate. Brown, who retired from UCSC in 1981, just happened to be visiting his former student the day the newspaper announced the MacArthur prize.

Although Brown initially was reluctant to take on a graduate student, Cantor persisted, walking with him on the beach and sharing long conversations.

"The pretense was I had read all the books he had read," Cantor said. "Afterward, I would run home and read all the books he had mentioned. It was a great pedagogical technique."

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