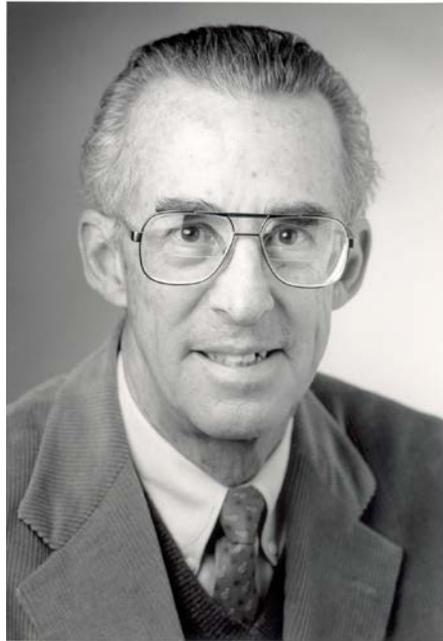


IN MEMORIAM

Rodolfo (Rudy) Ruibal  
Professor of Biology Emeritus  
UC Riverside  
1927 – 2016



Emeritus professor Rodolfo (Rudy) Ruibal died on Aug. 30, 2016 at age 88. Rudy, one of the ten founding faculty of U. C. Riverside’s Biology Department, joined UCR as an Acting Instructor in 1954, advanced to Full Professor in 1967, and retired in 1994.

Born in Havana Cuba on 27 October 1927, Rudy developed an early love of science and “herps” (reptiles and amphibians). He loved chasing the abundant *Anolis* lizards of Cuba and swimming among coral reef fish. When Rudy was 8 years old the family moved to New York City. There he took advantage of excellent educational opportunities and became the first of his immediate family to graduate from high school. In NYC Rudy briefly attended a Jesuit school and then transferred to Horace Mann Elementary, an experimental school run by Columbia University’s Teachers College that cultivated independent inquiry. He thrived there and even collaborated with another student on an encyclopedia of snakes of the world!

After elementary school Rudy attended a public high school and then McBurney prep school, “a very, very good high school with very, very good teachers.” With this preparation, he was readily accepted into Harvard University in 1943—at age 16—where he majored in biology and worked in the Museum of Comparative Zoology. He also interned at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York City in the Herpetology department, where he met Irene Shamu, his wife-to-be, who was working as secretary to Charles Bogert, the department chair. Rudy’s association with the AMNH continued in the 1960s when he led a group of graduate students studying spadefoot toads at the AMNH’s Southwestern Research Station in Portal,

Arizona. This inaugurated a distinguished history of research that continues today and that has involved investigators from across the country.

When Rudy turned 18 and became eligible for the military draft, he “couldn’t stand the indecision” and enlisted voluntarily. Assigned to the Army Medical Corps, he “learned a lot of biology” and clinical skills that qualified him to oversee an Army lab and work at a hospital as a lab technician after he left the Army. He returned to Harvard in 1948 to finish his BA, and then did graduate work at Columbia University. John Moore—who later joined the UCR faculty—was his advisor and mentor. Rudy obtained his MA in 1953 and PhD in 1954, with financial help from the GI Bill.

While at Columbia Rudy also worked at City College as a teaching assistant for Herman Spieth. When Spieth became the first Chair of Biology at the newly-opened UCR in 1954, Rudy followed. As in everything he did, Rudy taught at UCR with passion and élan. But one of his classes stood out—Functional Anatomy of the Vertebrates. Rudy led “Vert” for many years with such style that he became the stuff of legend. Vert students even formed a fan club, wearing badges that featured him in the elegant suit and tie he always wore to class. As Professor Harvey Lillywhite (University of Florida) recalls from his UCR undergraduate days, “Rudy’s *modus operandi* as an educator was eclectic, and he was a superb mentor for anyone interested in a solid liberal arts education.” Rudy’s dedication to teaching was honored with UCR’s Distinguished Teaching Award in 1978.

Rudy served UC in various capacities during his 40 years at UCR. He helped to establish the Philip L. Boyd Deep Canyon Desert Research Center, the inaugural UC Natural Reserve. He served as Chair of the College of Letters and Science (1961-1964); as faculty advisor to UC President Clark Kerr during the unrest of the 1960s; and as Biology Department Chair (1979-1982). He helped to establish UC-Mexus, a program to support US-Mexico academic collaborations, and served as acting Chair (1992-1993).

Rudy’s research took him to many places in Latin America, including Cuba, the West Indies, Mexico, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, and Paraguay. He studied the ecology and evolution of Caribbean lizards, and the physiological ecology of herps more generally. He elucidated how arid-environment amphibians save water by spreading wax on their skin (*Phyllomedusa*) or secreting water-retaining “cocoon” (*Scaphiopus*), and how the structure of their foot pads allows geckos to climb vertical surfaces via dry adhesion.

Rudy served his scientific field as editor for *Copeia*, and as chief editor of *Journal of Herpetology* for nearly a decade. He precipitated transformative changes to the *Journal* and to its parent Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles, opening both to non-English-speaking scientists, particularly those in South America. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship during 1967-68, and was elected a Fellow of the California Academy of Sciences.

Rudy’s interests extended far beyond biology, to the liberal arts writ large. The small-college flavor of UCR in the early days made it easy to interact across academic fields, and he relished this opportunity. Lunchtime gatherings at the University Commons with faculty from diverse departments were a tradition that persisted throughout Rudy’s time at UCR. As Harvey

Lillywhite recalled, “I remember when I was an undergraduate at UCR, the professor of a course I took in English literature told me how much he liked Dr. Ruibal for being “a fine person” and for being much, much broader than many other scientists that he knew.”

Rudy’s and Irene’s rich social life extended well beyond the university. Students were often invited to dinner at their house (Irene was a talented cook), where they interacted with a diverse mix of other guests, such as Tim Hays of the *Press Enterprise*, Riverside’s excellent newspaper. Rudy was also very artistic. As a young man in New York City he took “life” classes with nude models, and when he took up figure drawing again upon arriving at UCR he convinced the Riverside Art Museum to shed its practice of having models wear bathing suits. Upon retirement Rudy turned wholeheartedly to pottery and jewelry making.

To artistic talent must be added athleticism. At Harvard Rudy played soccer, and at UCR he often took a bit of time off during the day to play tennis, continuing this sport well into retirement.

Rudy loved children, delighting in showing them simple Cuban animal toys constructed of everyday materials that could be made to move in realistic and interesting ways—for example, roosters made of straw that could be moved as if they were fighting cocks.

Rodolfo Ruibal was “a class act” who led “a passionate, productive and interesting life” (Lillywhite 2016). In this long life he gave from his heart to UCR, to the UC system, and to his profession—and to his many students, colleagues and friends.

Mary V. Price  
Irwin W. Sherman  
Nickolas M. Waser  
David Reznick  
Carol Simon

#### Literature Cited:

Lillywhite, Harvey. 2016. Herpetology loses a class act: Rodolfo Ruibal, 1927-2016. *Herpetological Review* 47(4):741-745

#### Links

Transcription of Oral History Interview with Rodolfo Ruibal:  
<https://ucrhistory.ucr.edu/ruibal.htm>