



Remembering Jerry Mertens

BY RICHARD W. MALOTT

“I was a welfare kid. (I am so old the term “welfare,” was called “relief” as I grew up.) I grew up on “relief” all the way through high school. In 1954, I graduated from high school with no intention of going to college. In 1965, I was hired as a psychology faculty member at St. Cloud State. There was a lot of help in those 11 years to a ‘less fortunate’ kid (me). I was one who needed help with many deficits in my repertoire in the worst way.”

— Jerry Mertens

Gerald (Jerry) Mertens died on January 11, 2019. Jerry was not a scholar, not a researcher; he had an MA from the University of Mississippi, and then he was a teacher at Saint Cloud State University (SCSU). He taught there for 53 years, from 1965–2018, the longest serving faculty member at Saint Cloud. But Jerry was also the founder of ABAI. If there’d been no Jerry Mertens, there’d have been no ABAI; and you wouldn’t be a member of this wonderful organization.

He loved the Amazing Randi, a professional debunker, almost as much as he loved the amazing B. F. Skinner. Jerry, and his grandchildren Noah, Jonah, and Hannah, regularly put on a magic show at Western Michigan University (WMU) for me and my BATS grad students. Students were charged with figuring out how the ‘magic’ works, and winners (the best two guessers) got a free dinner at a nice restaurant at the next ABAI conference.

“His infectious enthusiasm and devotion to student development was definitely a large factor in my entry into the field.”

— Matt Miller

The following paragraphs are a mild paraphrase/plagiarization of Marge Peterson/Vaughn’s *The Midwestern Association of Behavior Analysis: Past, Present, Future*, published in the first issue of *The Behavior Analyst*: In 1969, Jerry chaired a two-day session at the Midwestern Psychological Association (MPA), where the topic shifted from behavior analysis to improving the behavioral orientation in the MPA. And in 1971, Jerry chaired a full day’s program on behavioral education methodology at MPA, but this time the topic shifted to organizing a behavioral group in the Midwest.

Then Jerry got behaviorists Jim Dinsmoor elected as a member of the MPA Council and Nate Azrin as president in 1973, and Sid Bijou as a council member in 1974. Also in 1974, Izzy Goldiamond got the Billing’s Hospital Auditorium at the University of Chicago, where Jerry could hold what I consider the first meeting of ABAI, though it was initially called the Midwest Society of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior, until Vic Laties suggested it be changed, and so, for a while, we became the Midwestern Experimental Analysis of Behavior Group. However, at the meeting we again changed our name; this time we became the Midwestern Analysis of Behavior Association (MABA). Jerry was appointed the General Coordinator of our meeting for 1975, which was to be held concurrently with MPA, in Chicago.

In addition, the Organizational Committee was formed. Its goal continued to be to get behavior analysis accepted within MPA, which included getting a formal behavior analysis position on the MPA Program Committee, but the best MPA would offer was a position for a “maze psychologist.” To this, our Neil Kent replied, “I don’t know anyone who still calls anybody a ‘maze psychologist.’”

Then Jerry’s undergrad protégée, Marge Peterson, graduated from SCSU and entered WMU’s grad program, which gave Jerry confidence to delegate much of the preparation of the 1975 MABA conference to Neil and the WMU crew. And while Jerry was desperately trying

to get financial support for MABA, Neil implemented the time-honored procedure of giving Marge academic credit, rather than dollars, for putting in many hard-working hours playing a crucial role in the establishment of MABA (which would later become ABAI). The conference was to be held in May, the same time as MPA, in the Blackstone Hotel, just across a narrow street from the Hilton, the MPA hotel. In the late fall of ’74, Neil and Marge were hoping MABA might get 200 attendees, but by early ’75, the onslaught of papers being submitted caused them to raise their hopes to 500 attendees.

Then, in the summer of 1975, Jerry took a group of his Road Scholars on his annual bus tour of behavioral centers around the country, where he also met with behavior analysts, confirming invited speakers, getting titles of their talks, and finding chairs for the presentations. A lot of last-minute hustles. But at our conference, we had 95 papers, 26 symposia, 14 workshops, 20 invited speakers, and 1,000 people in attendance!

“Rest in peace my dear mentor! I felt so lucky and honored to be your student and TA at SCSU from 2012–14. You were the most important person guiding me to this field. I learned so much from you, not just technical things, but also how to be a responsible and helpful professional. I remember when I first became your TA, I was frequently late to our meetings. You were very angry, and told me, ‘If you are not punctual, and always late, you will never be successful, you won’t get into a master’s program, and you should just go back to China.’ Hearing that was very aversive, but it changed my behavior. I hope what I am currently doing in China is what you expect from me—helping others have the best life possible.”

— Siqi Xie

In addition to playing a major role in the preparation for our 1975 MABA conference, Jerry also developed the first draft of our by-laws and objectives. But then, on the last day of the conference, there was the meeting of the Organizational Committee: They decided to cut loose from MPA. MABA would meet when and where we chose, independent of MPA. But that was completely contrary to Jerry’s rationale for establishing MABA, which was to influence MPA, to get them to be more accepting of behavior analysis and the research done by behavior analysts, not to establish a completely separate organization; so Jerry stormed out of the first or second

pre-ABAI conference (depending on who's counting)—he stormed out of his own conference, vowing never to return, but also vowing not to abandon his original goal of making MPA hospitable to behavior analysis and behavior analysts. And, indeed, Jerry, along with me and a few others, did struggle to continue working toward softening up MPA; after all, he'd gotten a behavior analyst as president and a couple more on the board. We could just build from there. But as the brilliant Don Baer later commented, it's one thing to pull off a revolution; but watch out for the counter revolution. Nate was the first and last behavior analyst to be president of MPA. And after a few years of struggling, Jerry finally gave up. But more importantly, and what I admire Jerry most for, is that after a few years of voicing concern about how MABA had corrupted its original mission, he returned to our fold, becoming an active member and bringing his undergrad students with him. Not only that, but he returned, every year, dressed in a pigeon suit passing out M&Ms to help ABAI members get through the tedium of standing in the registration lines at the beginning of conferences.

"I took the last 'Psychology Tour' in the early 2000s with Jerry and Sylvia. It was an incredible experience, and Jerry had an incredible influence on me. We were so happy to see him and his family last summer in Salem, and will definitely miss him. Peace always to Jerry!"

— Darlene Crone-Todd and Barrie Todd

Even if Jerry hadn't played a key role in the beginning of MABA, I mean ABA, I mean ABAI (what's next?), he did play a major role in spreading the behavior analysis word, taking a bus load of students on a tour of behavior analysis centers every summer, running an undergrad behavior analysis training program at SCSU, and sending his graduates to behavior analysis grad programs around the country. Though many of you may never have heard of him, Jerry was a major force in the field. ❖



Additional Links and References

You should read Marge's article on the early history of ABAI, not only to learn more about Jerry but also to learn more about ABAI and how to start a really cool organization, from scratch and with no scratch: Peterson, M. E. (1978). The Midwestern Association of Behavior Analysis: Past, present, future. *The Behavior Analyst*, 3-15.

You should also check out Jerry's own self-written obituary—pure Jerry Mertens: www.legacy.com/obituaries/SCTimes/obituary.aspx?page=lifestory&pid=191257922

And if you'd like to see Jerry in action, here's a video we shot of him doing his magic and lecturing to my WMU grad students: <https://vimeo.com/27278411>