

Bryan Ellickson, Economist, February 12, 1941 - August 5, 2024

By David K. Levine

I met Bryan Ellickson when I was an undergraduate at UCLA and he was a newly tenured member of the economics faculty. Subsequently I went to graduate school at MIT and returned to UCLA as an assistant professor: we were friends and colleagues there for about 25 years. Together with Joe Ostroy the three of us formed the core of the “theory group” at UCLA, a department that when we were young mostly disdained theory. I think that over the years the three of us were able to turn that around so that by the time we left economy theory was (and remains) one of the strengths of the UCLA economics department.

Bryan was a beautiful human being and a beautiful mind. He had unbounded interest in everything around him, especially everything to do with economics and mathematics. Indeed, if he had a weakness, it was that he was too interested in everything around him and combined with a high level of perfection he was never a “prolific” producer of papers, but rather a producer of deep papers and of wonderful books. His book on competitive equilibrium is a classic: Bryan mastered everything known (and some unknown) on the subject and packaged it into the ideal book for the advanced economic theory graduate student.

I do not think that anyone that knew Bryan was unaware of his love of mathematics and his awareness of the deep connections between mathematical ideas and economics. He was early to general equilibrium theory and subsequently to mathematical finance. The beauty of mathematical theory always appealed to his beautiful mind.

Perhaps strangely for a mind of such mathematical bent, Bryan was also an extraordinary administrator. He served as department chair in a deeply divided department and brought us together and successfully brought much needed new blood into the department. Having (briefly) served as his successor I can speak to the extraordinary difficulty in dealing both with a department with widely divergent views about what constitutes “good” economics and an administration that at times was less than functional. Bryan dealt with this smoothly and with grace and while I am sure he felt the strain he certainly kept it from view.

Bryan’s twenty odd publications are the tip of the iceberg of his contributions to economics. If you like numbers, the thirty five PhD dissertations he supervised are a much better measure. His first student was the world famous economist Walter Edward Williams. Another six of those students are close personal friends of mine and one is my long-time co-author: while his students will speak for themselves, I know the time and effort he devoted to them, and how his clarity of thought and reasoning helped them overcome the many obstacles to writing a PhD dissertation.

Bryan’s distinguishing features as a human being were his gentle understanding and unbridled enthusiasm. He cared for people: I was his friend and his students were his friends, and he was there with advice and indeed “whatever it took” when we needed him. In addition to “whatever it

took” it was a joy to listen to Bryan explaining - with incredible clarity - his latest ideas and enthusiasms.

Bryan meant the world to me. He was a mentor in the truest sense of the word. He fought for me early in my career. He gave me the courage to pursue mathematical ideas in economics. He never let me forget the importance of not merely mathematics, but mathematics that is meaningful for economics. Looking at my own career I see that I modeled myself on Bryan: his deep interest and love of mathematics, his focus on real economic problems and issues. I miss you Bryan, we all do,