

# Passing: Richard (Dick) Downs

**Professor Emeritus Richard Erskine Downs passed away  
on May 14**

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Thursday, June 13, 2019

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PROFESSOR RICHARD DOWNS IN 1977 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE.

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A final remembrance: in 1949 Dick married Julie van Oldenborgh from Holland. They were together for 70 years, building a close-knit Dutch-Anglo-American family that now spans four generations and five countries. Julie and Dick passed within 48 hours of each other.

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Dick Downs — a man of dry wit, with an eye for irony — born December 2, 1920, passed away at age 98 on May 14, 2019, in Princeton, NJ. Dick started at UNH in 1962 and retired in 1991. He was born in Cambridge, Mass., and grew up in North Andover, Mass., attending Phillips Academy (grad. 1938) and Harvard (grad. 1942). As a child, he experienced the Great Depression. During World War II, Dick served in the U.S. Navy (acquiring Japanese to assist in the interception of military intelligence), rising to the rank of lieutenant. Following the war he worked for a couple of years in the Office of Naval History, with the historian Samuel Elliot Morrison. Then, taking advantage of the GI Bill, he went to Europe for graduate work in anthropology: first in Geneva (1947), next in Paris (1949), where he studied with Claude Lévi Strauss, and finally Leiden, from whose university he earned a Ph.D. (1956). Immediately on earning his doctorate, Dick returned to the USA and the University of Illinois (1956-1962). There he worked

with Julian Steward who was conducting a large-scale, comparative analysis of modernization in eleven third world societies. In the fall of 1962, he began his duties in the Sociology-Anthropology Department.

Dick was an educational leader while at UNH. He chaired the Sociology-Anthropology Department between 1973-1979, facilitating its rise to national prominence. He created Anthropology at the University and chaired it (1988-1990), when it first became an independent department. He also worked in the Faculty Senate representing faculty interests with vigor. Dick's best leadership skill was — agree with him, or disagree — you trusted him.

Dick was intellectually serious. He was a social anthropologist who specialized in Malaysia and Indonesia in the Pacific. He published on head hunting, religion and village change in Malaysia. During the late 1960s and 1970s, he was part of a group of UNH scholars (including Walter Buckley and Tom Burns) that sought to develop systems theory beyond the confines that had been set for it by sociologist Talcott Parsons. He was a marvelous editor, co-editing four volumes on land tenure, African famines, warfare, capitalism and states. He was associate editor of the journal *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*.

During his later years at the University, Dick completed numerous development missions, under contract to the U.S. Agency for International Development, in Senegal, Mauritania, Rwanda, Swaziland and the Republic of the Congo. Dick was good at development. He cut through the bureaucratic babble of "experts" out to make "rational maximizers" out of the "target population." Dick made friends with ordinary people on the ground, listened to them, fought for practical things that actually helped them.

A final remembrance: in 1949 Dick married Julie van Oldenborgh from Holland. They were together for 70 years, building a close-knit Dutch-Anglo-American family that now spans four generations and five countries. Julie and Dick passed within 48 hours of each other.

- WRITTEN BY:

[Steve Reyna, emeritus professor of anthropology](#) | College of Liberal Arts

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

# Passing: Richard (Dick) Downs

**Professor Emeritus Richard Erskine Downs passed away on May 14**

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Thursday, June 13, 2019

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