Donald Lee Johnson, professor of geography at the University of Illinois from 1970–2003 and emeritus professor from 2003, passed away on 10 May 2013. He was born on 8 March 1934 in Long Beach, California. Don received his Ph.D. in geography in 1972 from the University of Kansas. Diana Johnson was his life partner for 53 years, and wife for 49 of them.

Don’s life and career were an inspiration to many. Though retired, he never stopped his research and writing. He was one of those blessed individuals whose career was his hobby, and he never tired of his work.

Over the course of his career, Don taught 10 different courses in physical geography, soil geomorphology, and zoogeography at the University of Illinois. He loved what he taught and his enthusiasm was infectious. Don was always entertaining and positive in the classroom, and his students truly loved him. Don extended his enthusiasm for research beyond the classroom, taking his students on field trips every semester.

He led 28 different undergraduates on independent study projects and loved the relationships that he developed with students. His list of advisees and graduate committees includes 10 with senior theses, 23 with master’s theses, and 26 with Ph.D. dissertations. Many of his students have gone on to highly visible careers, but most importantly, they all continued to stay in touch with him.

Perhaps the best testament to Don’s teaching are reports given by his former students. His students left his classroom believing that soils—of all things—could be interesting, exciting, and important, and that there is still much to learn about them. Never one to simply cite the party line, Don continually challenged the status quo and asked his students to do the same. He taught his students to question what they saw, and to always think outside the box. He simply asked them to learn by looking. He was a keen observer of natural systems, often seeing things that others ignored. He called this his intellectual filter. There’s no doubt—he viewed the world through different intellectual filters than most, and in so doing he saw things that other people looked at but didn’t quite see. If you’ve noticed the signature at the end of Don’s emails, you’ve seen the quote, “We don’t see things as they are, but as we are.”

Don’s list of published papers in refereed journals and books numbers over 80. And yet, the numbers don’t do justice to his contribution to these disciplines, nor to the long-lasting impact that his work will have on future generations. Twice, Don won the G.K. Gilbert Award for Excellence in Geomorphic Research from the Association of American Geographers Geomorphology Specialty Group (AAG GSG). His second Gilbert Award—won just this year
with colleague and former student Jennifer Burnham for their GSA Special Paper on mima mounds—illustrates that Don never stopped doing what he loved—research and fieldwork. In 2005, he received the Distinguished Career Award from the GSG of the AAG. Don was a truly interdisciplinary scholar, as evidenced by the Rip Rapp Archaeological Geology Award that he also received from the Geological Society of America. Don was equally at home with geographers, geologists, soil scientists, archaeologists, and biologists, and published in journals in all these disciplines.

Almost single-handedly, Don published paper after paper, gave talk after talk, and had one-on-one conversations with people from all walks of life, all designed to highlight the importance of bioturbation and biomechanical processes on soil formation. His theoretical papers on soil genesis and evolution dramatically changed the way that the academic community views soil formation. This work has particularly assisted archaeologists and tropical soil scientists by helping to explain the formation of stone lines, enigmatic features whose origins had been debated for decades. His work on mima mounds helped settle a centuries-long debate on the origins of these features. Don’s theoretical contributions continue to be revolutionary and of lasting import. His body of work will enjoy a position among the very best soil theoreticians in recent history. And of course, much of this work was done in full collaboration with his career-long field partner, Diana.

Don was an explorer, a field person, and an adventurer. Ever curious, Don and Diana traveled the world seeking answers to the question: How do Earth systems really work? Don was a thoughtful and generous man, always taking the time to be kind and gracious to everyone he met, forging many strong friendships. He was a true inspiration to everyone he encountered. He also loved working in the garden, playing racquetball, and writing poetry. Don’s family, friends, and colleagues will miss him dearly, but he lives on in our hearts and minds, and his passion for the soil lives on in what he has written.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF DONALD LEE JOHNSON


