

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on October 21, 2008,  
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Wilga M. Rivers  
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **WILGA M. RIVERS**

BORN: April 13, 1919

DIED: June 23, 2007

Wilga Marie Rivers was born on April 13, 1919, in Melbourne, Australia. She remained in her native country for the early years of her education and obtained a B.A. honors degree from the University of Melbourne in 1939. An M.A. from the same university followed in 1949. Rivers would eventually come to the United States to complete her graduate work and earn a PhD. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1962. Twelve years later she joined the Harvard faculty as a full professor in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, the first woman to hold that title. At the time of her appointment, Rivers had already established herself as an international authority on language learning and teaching, having taken her field beyond the behaviorist methodology of the 1960s and offered in its stead a new psycholinguistic approach to foreign language pedagogy. Throughout her career she would work tirelessly to make contributions to the field of applied linguistics and to the professionalization of language teachers at every level.

Her first book, *The Psychologist and the Foreign-Language Teacher*, published in 1964, won notice as a result of its exploration of the relationship between the psychological processes of language acquisition and the rationale on which a specific methodology is based. While acknowledging the necessity of “making foreign language responses automatic at the manipulative level,” Rivers challenges the basic assumptions of the audio-lingual method (ALM) prevalent at the time and emphasizes the emotional, or affective, component of foreign language learning as well as the need to make material meaningful. Here, as in later books, Rivers focuses on the individual learner, criticizing ALM’s assumption that all students learn in the same way and that it is possible to learn a foreign language through repetition and drill without the expression of personal meaning. Her last chapter, consisting of recommendations for the teacher, represents a constant in Rivers’ writing: the desire to combine scholarly research and practical application in order to ensure that classroom practices rest on a sound theoretical foundation.

*Teaching Foreign-Language Skills*, perhaps Rivers’ most important contribution to the field of applied linguistics, was published in 1968 and subsequently translated into Japanese, Romanian,

and Portuguese. In addition, special editions were prepared for use by teachers in India, Pakistan, and Southeast Asia. A later revision completed in 1981 was also translated into Japanese. This book, even more than *The Psychologist and the Foreign-Language Teacher*, demonstrates her ability to identify and synthesize the multiple studies and theories of language and learning. It presents an exhaustive discussion of the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing; as well as chapters on various methodologies and theories, on sounds and phonetics, technology, and cultural understanding. Little wonder that an editor at the University of Chicago Press, in writing to Rivers about the possibility of distributing the new 1981 edition, referred to the work as “the *bible*” of foreign language teaching.

In the many tributes Rivers received over the years, her leadership and helpfulness are invariably mentioned. A former graduate student expressed a sentiment shared by many: “I have always been thankful to Wilga for her confidence in students, her unwavering support, and her generosity.” Rivers was also an equally dedicated mentor to younger colleagues in the language section of the Department, distributing articles on new or interesting approaches to language teaching, proposing these colleagues as conference speakers and, in general, inspiring them to improve their courses and their teaching. Unselfish in her support of the non-ladder language faculty, she included them as chapter authors in two of the volumes she edited. These efforts often extended beyond her department and even Harvard. Most notably, she created *Sine Nomine*, a group of college language teachers in the Boston area who gathered four times a year to discuss specific topics and profit from the opportunity to exchange ideas, to network, and to gain experience in making presentations.

Wilga Rivers’ name was not associated with any specific language teaching methodology. Just as she felt that students’ individual differences and learning styles should be recognized, so she believed that teachers needed to adapt pedagogical approaches to their own personalities. This belief was due, at least in part, to her experiences as a student. When growing up in Melbourne in the 1920s and 1930s in an environment limited by means and geography, she was awed by the ability of a French teacher to motivate her students in the study of a remote culture and its language. In the first installment of her memoirs, *Down Under/Up Top*, Rivers asks: “How then did this young teacher arouse such enthusiasm for what to us was an esoteric subject? ... [S]he loved young people and she loved teaching... [W]hen I started teaching French myself, I had in my memory a wonderful model that I wanted to emulate.”

Rivers’ success spread well beyond the world of the school teacher who inspired her. She wrote approximately eighty articles on language teaching and learning and was the author, co-author, or editor of fifteen books, including a series of “practical guides” for the teaching of English, French, German, Hebrew, and Spanish. She was an invited or keynote speaker in over forty countries, even long after her retirement. Active in professional organizations, notably as the first president of the American Association for Applied Linguistics, Rivers received many prizes, served on a variety of advisory councils, consulted for both the Canadian and United States government, and was awarded an honorary doctorate by Middlebury.

Wilga Rivers suffered a severe stroke in July 2005 and died on June 23, 2007. She will be sorely missed by her many friends and colleagues throughout the world and by the profession she served with such unstinting devotion.

Respectfully Submitted,

Elvira Di Fabio  
Donald Stone  
Judith Frommer, Chair