Timothy F.H. Allen, Ph.D. — July 6, 1942 - May 1, 2025

Timothy F.H. Allen, Emeritus Professor of Botany at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, renowned teacher, researcher, mentor and systems theorist, passed away peacefully, at his home on May 1, 2025. He was 82.

Dr. Allen was born in South Croyden, Greater London, UK, on July 6, 1942. He attended University College North Wales in Bangor, North Wales, UK, completing his B.S. in 1964 and his Ph.D. in 1968. Tim worked as Lecturer at the University of Ife, Nigeria, for two years before taking his position as Professor in the UW-Madison Department of Botany in 1970 where, for 40 years, he taught courses, mentored students, and advanced the use of hierarchy theory and complex systems theory in ecological applications.

While studying algae on rock surfaces (an excuse to go rock climbing!) at University College North Wales Tim discovered the analytical methods Dr. John Curtis presented in his book *The Vegetation of Wisconsin*. While teaching in Nigeria, he met the college librarian who had ties to UW-Madison. From there Tim had the opportunity to visit and meet faculty who had worked with Curtis. In 1970 a faculty position opened at UW-Madison. Tim applied, was hired, and soon discovered his Birge Hall office was once occupied by Dr. Curtis.

While developing new analytical methodologies for plant communities, Tim was one of the first UW professors to take advantage of newly available computer-based analytical methods. He quickly realized that the regular use of computer-based analyses would require a deeper understanding of systems theory as applied to complex ecological systems. Tim devoted himself to that work. He often described himself as a systems scientist as well as a botanist and ecologist. Over his career Tim authored or contributed to over 100 publications. Among his eleven books, *Hierarchy* (1982; 2nd ed. 2017), *Toward a Unified Ecology* (1992; 2nd ed 2015), and *Supply-side Sustainability* (2003) had the most profound effects on that minority of scientists open to a considering different way of looking at complex adaptive systems.

Throughout his career Tim collaborated with scientists around the world to advance a systems perspective as applied to ecology, sustainability, land management, and conservation. He regularly consulted with scientists from the US Forest Service, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, and the International Joint Commission. As his work advanced and was acknowledged by the systems community, Tim was elected president of the International Society for the Systems Sciences, whose past presidents included Nobel laureates and other academic luminaries.

In addition to his foundational work in systems ecology, at UW-Madison Tim was renowned on campus for his teaching style. He taught many courses within the Botany Department and also proudly served as a faculty member of the interdisciplinary Integrated Liberal Studies (ILS) program and the Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies. Tim taught courses at all levels. His most widely attended class was *Botany 240: Plants and Man*, and its companion course *ILS 252: Contemporary Life Science* with as many as 400 students each year.

Tim was a gifted natural performer with a flair for the dramatic, and anyone attending one of his courses could not help but be affected by his multimedia presentations with separate images on three big screens. When class was in session, anyone walking through the lobby of Birge Hall would hear Tim's voice booming out of the lecture hall, along with student reactions and regular applause at lecture's end. His course reader included a four-page explanation of why the name *Plants and Man* was appropriate given the long tradition of Liberal Arts education, and why he refused to change it to something more politically correct. On any given day students might hear poetry, see Tim sing to point out the biological references in traditional folk songs, listen to why the shape of wine glasses evolved as they did, watch Bananas Foster flambé being made, understand why cultures using left-footed peat spades looked down at anyone using their right foot, or learn about agricultural practices in ancient Rome.

For UW students, *Plants and Man* was the course where one could bake bread, brew beer, or prepare a multicourse dinner in lieu of writing a term paper. Any option had to meet the high standards Tim expected. Tim often commented that it was easier to do well on a term paper than it was on one of the projects, but doing the projects well would teach you more about what really mattered. A tangential educational aspect of being one of his graduate students was learning the grading standards for bread, beer, and ethnic cuisine.

Tim was one of the finest mentors most of his students had ever known. Over his 40 years at UW, he served as major advisor for nearly 50 master's and doctoral students, and as a committee member for at least 100 more. Tim's lab was a forum for exchanging information and developing ideas for research. As advisor, Tim always sought out the best in his people. He was quick to understand research challenges and was generous with his time and assistance in addressing them. He created a learning environment that allowed his students to be their best. The systems approaches Tim employed were applicable across many disciplines, and the work of Tim's people ranged from experimental, to data collection and analysis, to modeling, to purely theoretical.

In Tim's lab, students from different disciplines offered insights and aided each other's learning in an environment that encouraged collaboration. To those not versed in systems approaches, the lab's workings initially seemed inscrutable. With time most came to feel themselves part of a community that challenged each member to excel. Most of Dr. Allen's students will tell you that their experience with Tim changed who they were and how they saw themselves. Knowing Tim had complete faith in their abilities, his students often exceeded their own expectations.

Tim's ideal of community and collaboration led him to organize a weekly meeting of his lab group called Sandbox. By Tim's decree, there was to be no formal structure or agenda; rather, these sessions were an open opportunity to play with ideas. He called it intellectual mud wrestling, where any idea or insight was open for exploration, discussion, or debate. What was initially a bring-your-own brown bag lunch grew over the years into a weekly event where Tim prepared a multicourse lunch for twenty or more participants. He managed this because he had a kitchen range installed as equipment in the teaching lab for *Plants and Man*. Tim put in such effort because he believed in the value of a critical exchange of ideas. Because he took it seriously, attendees did as well. They brought a wide range of perspectives, ranging from the sciences, politics, law, and other disciplines. Tim fostered this diversity of opinion, because he knew that a too narrow focus was ultimately limiting for everyone. After retiring in 2010, Tim continued to hold Sandbox sessions, in person and, most recently, via zoom with friends and colleagues from across the US and Europe.

For those who knew him, Tim was larger-than-life. His genius was evident; his gift was to make it understandable, useful, and fun. He was an able host and a natural raconteur. He approached life with integrity, kindness, and generosity. Tim lived life to the fullest, both at home and when traveling the world. The gift of his nurturing spirit transformed not only his family, but also the lives of the many students he encountered over the years.

Tim Allen is survived by his wife, psychologist Valerie Ahl, Ph.D. and their three children, Josephine, Harrison and Gwynedd. A celebration of his life is being planned for family and friends to be held later this summer. There will be champagne, as Tim instructed, and a scattering of ashes.

For more information, or to send condolences, please email his wife Valerie at *veahl@wisc.edu* or daughter Gwynedd at *gwyneddallen@gmail.com*

Prepared by Tom Brandner, Ph.D. & Ron McCormick, Ph.D.

The family has created a Go Fund Me account for memorial donations.

https://www.gofundme.com/f/professor-tim-allens-family-farm-legacy