

Kenneth Cmiel

Our Colleague and Friend



The Department mourns the loss of our colleague and friend **Ken Cmiel**. Ken is survived by his wife Anne Duggan, and their children Willa, Cordelia, and Noah. In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to a charity of choice or to a memorial fund for Ken's children: Cmiel Children Memorial Fund, UI Community Credit Union, P.O. Box 2240, Iowa City, IA 52244-2244.

Ken collapsed from the effects of an inoperable brain tumor on Thursday, February 2. He could not be revived and died peacefully Saturday morning. We have lost a friend whose generosity and love has enriched all our lives. We will miss him beyond measure.

Ken was a brilliant scholar whose capacious interests ranged from pop music to global human rights. His first book, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight Over Popular Speech in Nineteenth Century America*, explored battles over refining and confining the English language in education, politics, philology, and the popular press. A “learned, imaginative, and very important work of cultural history,” as one review noted, “the most sophisticated and most revealing exploration yet into the complex and tangled relations of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture in the United States.” His second book, *A Home of Another Kind: One Chicago Orphanage and the Tangle of Child Welfare* was a “militantly minimalist” shot across the bow of the scholarship on the welfare state; an incisive and heartbreaking examination of social policy as it played out in one institution. More recently, Ken had turned to the global idea of human rights - an intellectually and geographically expansive project that, though now tragically unfinished, has nevertheless made an important impact.

Ken was, without pretence, and in the fullest sense of each word, a scholar and a citizen. His leadership of the University of Iowa Center for Human Rights underscored his determination to understand the world around him, and to change it for better. As a friend and colleague, he was a man of unbridled generosity and extraordinary humility. Behind his Cheshire-cat grin lay both a boundless enthusiasm for the human elements of academic life, and a deep cynicism for the “chore of professional posturing.” In a candid reflection on his profession, Ken captured his own intellectual journey, and offers the rest of us a roadmap for carrying on:

Teach classes that are meaningful to you and that engage that portion of your students that are reachable. Ignore, in other words, the very idea of professional wisdom. Only write what you want to write. Once you have job security (which I know is a huge barrier) *don't* write if you don't want to. Write for media directed at non-historians, whether that be the local newspaper or fancy national magazines. Write for other academic disciplines. Explore other media than the printed word. Ignoring what the profession rewards might very well be a mark of sanity at the close of the twentieth century.

Teaching

Ken routinely taught courses in the global history of human rights, the history of visual culture in the United States, and a survey of U.S. popular music since 1890.

16A:108 The Image in America
16W:127 Human Rights Politics, 1940-Present
16:074 Popular Music in American Culture
16:268 Readings in Modern United States

Publications

- *The Human Rights Idea: The Ideological Origins of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (in progress)
- *A Home of Another Kind: One Chicago Orphanage and the Tangle of Child Welfare* (University of Chicago Press, 1995)
- *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight Over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (William Morrow & Company, 1990; paperback, University of California Press, 1991)
- "The Swirl of Image and Sound: The Latest Version of Antirealism," forthcoming in *The Arts of Democracy* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005)
- "Drowning in Pictures," forthcoming in *Columbia Encyclopedia of Recent US History* (Columbia University Press, 2005)
- "Libraries, Books, and the Information Age, 1945-2000," forthcoming in *The Cambridge History of the Book in America*, volume 5 (Cambridge University Press, 2005)
- "The Recent History of Human Rights," *American Historical Review* 109:1 (February 2004): 117-135.
- "Talking About Truth," *Modern Intellectual History* 1:2 (2004): 293-304.
- "Orphanages" and "Dependent Children," *The Encyclopedia of Chicago* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- "Freedom of Information, Human Rights, and the Origins of Third-World Solidarity," in *Truth Claims: Representation and Human Rights* (Rutgers University Press, 2002).
- "The President's Textual Relations," *New York Times* (19 August 2001).
- "Back to the Future," *Reviews in American History* 28:3 (September 2000): 455-459.
- "The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States," *Journal of American History* 86:3 (December 1999): 1231-1250.
- "Talking It Over," *Reviews in American History* 27:1 (1999): 156-162.
- "On Cynicism, Evil, and the Discovery of Communication in the 1940s," *Journal of Communication* (1996).
- "The Fate of the Nation and the Withering of the State," *American Literary History* 8:1 (Spring 1996): 184-202.
- "The Politics of Civility," in *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994).
- "History against Itself," *Journal of American History* 81:3 (December 1994): 1169-1174.
- "Passionate Kisses? [Commentary]," *Law and Social Inquiry* 19:3 (Summer 1994): 591-597.
- "Destiny and Amnesia: The Vision of Modernity in Robert Wiebe's 'Search for Order'," *Reviews in American History* 21:2 (July 1993): 352-368.
- "'A Broad Fluid Language of Democracy': Discovering the American Idiom," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 3 (December 1992): 913-936.
- "After Objectivity: What Comes Next in History," *American Literary History* 2:1 (Spring 1990): 170-181.
- "Be a Man!," *Reviews in American History* 18:1 (March 1990): 50-54.
- In April 2000, Ken participated in a symposium at the Library of Congress: Poetry and the American People: Reading, Voice, and Publication in the 19th and 20th Centuries. A "cybercast" of this event is archived [HERE](#). Ken's contribution starts about a minute and a half into the video; he speaks for about 15 minutes, and it is very much Ken.

Awards & Service

Presidential Lecturer, University of Iowa (2005)

Director, UI Center for Human Rights (Fall 2004-Present)

Global Scholar, University of Iowa (2004-2006)

Central Investment Fund for Research Enhancement Humanities Grant, University of Iowa (2001)

Harry Jack Gray Distinguished Visiting Professor, National Endowment for the Humanities, University of Hartford (1997)

Faculty Scholar, University of Iowa (1994-1997)

Haffner Fellow at the Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago (1986-1987)

Allan Nevins Prize, Society of American Historians (1986)

Whiting Fellow in the Humanities, Giles B. Whiting Foundation (1983-1984)