

Psign of the Times

November 10, 2004

Convocation participants at Yale on September 3, 2004.

The President's Room of Yale University is an elegant rotunda lined with stately portraits of many past presidents since Yale was founded in 1701. Under their collective gaze, 75 people convened September 3, 2004 to celebrate "75 Years of Excellence" – a historic convocation saluting two landmark events: the Ninth International Congress of Psychology hosted by Yale on September 1-7, 1929, and the founding of Psi Chi, the national honor society for psychology, on September 4, 1929.

Dean of Yale College Peter Salovey welcomed participants, and Harold Takooshian, Fordham University, joined Salovey to moderate and introduce 10 speakers who noted the three-fold significance of this convocation: for international psychology, for Psi Chi and Psi Beta, the honor society for community and junior colleges, and for Yale.

The 1929 International Congress has been described as "the most impressive gathering of psychologists in the history of the field," with 826 participants from 21 nations, including such notables as Ivan Pavlov (Russia), Francis Galton (England), Jean Piaget (Switzerland), and Kurt Lewin (Germany).

The Psi Chi honor society, born during the 1929 Congress, is now a unique organization on several points: It is the world's largest psychology organization with 467,000 life members, the largest honor society with chapters at 1,010 campuses, and the founder of a partner society Psi Beta in 1981 to offer recognition to the growing number of students enrolled in two-year institutions. Psi Chi was among the first affiliate groups of the American Psychological Society, formed in 1988, with thousands of Psi Chi members active in APS. Many APS Presidents have publicly credited Psi Chi with shaping their early careers, echoing APS Past President James L. McGaugh, who said, "Psi Chi played a major role in encouraging me to pursue a career in psychology when I was an undergraduate."

Yale University was the natural venue for these two watershed events, since the Yale faculty have long emphasized their mission of teaching alongside research excellence, and current psychology faculty emphasize superlative undergraduate teaching as well as research.

The House Two Ruths Built

The city of New Haven,
Connecticut, proclaims
September 3 Psi Chi Day.

Two keynote speakers shared their rich historical insights. John Hogan, St. John's University, spoke as the official historian of Psi Chi, Psi Beta, and the APA Division of International Psychology. With his trademark wit, Hogan detailed how graduate students Edwin Newman and "Bud" Lewis were not deterred by Harvard professor E. G. Boring's early opposition to "yet another psychology group," and how Boring soon came to admire the society they formed with charter signatories from 22 schools in 1929. Hogan said his history of Psi Chi wouldn't be complete without describing Ruth Cousins, its legendary executive officer who served for 33 years from 1958 to 1991). As Edwin Newman said, "Psi Chi is not so much what we founded as it is what Ruth made it."

The second keynote speaker was Daniel Bockert, the director of publications for Psi Chi from 1989 to 2003, and the society's unofficial historian. Bockert focused on Psi Chi's precarious first five years and the oft-overlooked role of "the other Ruth," Ruth Guilford, whose selfless devotion enabled Psi Chi to flourish rather than wither from 1930 to 1935. As Yankee Stadium is known as "the house that Ruth built," Bockert described Psi Chi as "the house the two Ruths built."

Yale University was represented by Salovey; department chair of psychology at Yale and APS Fellow and Charter Member Kelly Brownell; Psi Chi faculty advisor Laurie Santos; five student officers of the highly active Yale chapter of Psi Chi; and professors John Bargh, Linda Bartoshuk, William McGuire, Jerome Singer, and Edward Zigler. Bargh, Bartoshuk and McGuire are APS Fellow and Charter Members, and Bartoshuk also served on the APS Board of Directors.

International psychology speakers included APS Fellow and Charter Member and APA Past President Florence L. Denmark and Richard Velayo, Pace University, as well as Robert W. Rieber, City University of New York. Psi Chi was represented by its dynamic Eastern Vice President Vincent Prohaska, Lehman College. Prohaska reported that Psi Chi is now the number-one sponsor of student research, with awards surpassing \$120,000 per annum, and the able five-person staff and eleven-person Council who head Psi Chi today are committed to expanding this sum by recycling revenues from the 22,000 members who join each year. Prohaska presented Yale with an embossed volume of the oral history of Psi Chi, co-edited by APS Fellow and Charter Member Stephen F. Davis and Michael Wertheimer.

Psi Beta was represented by past president Ann E. Garrett Robinson, Gateway Community College. Robinson described the tight bond linking Psi Chi and Psi Beta, which for years were headed by Cousins and her daughter Carol Tracy. On behalf of John W. DeStefano, Jr., the mayor of New Haven, Connecticut, Robinson presented Yale with a parchment proclaiming September 3 as “Psi Chi Day in the City of New Haven.”

The same electricity that charged the air in the 1929 Congress seemed apparent to participants at the 2004 convocation.

More information is available at www.psichi.org, www.psibeta.org, www.internationalpsychology.org, and www.yale.edu. Those interested obtaining a 90-minute videotape of the convocation can contact Harold Takooshian at takoosh@aol.com.