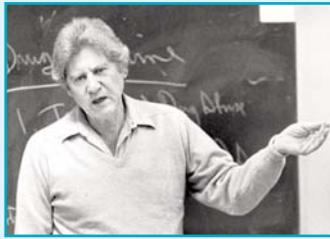


## IN MEMORIAM Lewis Yablonsky



Lew Yablonsky, a giant in the field of psychodrama, sociometry and group psychotherapy, has passed. Lew Yablonsky was born Nov. 23, 1924, in Irvington, NJ.

In the 1950's, Lew enrolled at New York University and completed both a Master's and Doctorate in Sociology. While there he met, studied and became a life long friend with J.L. Moreno. For several decades he was an active member of the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama – serving on the Executive Council and as President. In 1992 he received the J.L. Moreno Award. Zerka T. Moreno wrote, "Lewis Yablonsky was like a son to J.L. Moreno. And he reciprocated in every sense. He was an original teacher."

To learn more about Lew and his many accomplishments, go to the Memorial page on our website.

From the LA Times 2/18/2014

### **Lewis Yablonsky dies at 89; Cal State Northridge sociologist**

**Yablonsky was an authority on youth gangs, hippies and drug addicts whose rough-and-tumble early years gave him insights others lacked.**

When Lewis Yablonsky was growing up in New Jersey in the 1930s, he was beaten by poor whites for being Jewish and by black gangs for being white. He committed petty thefts, ran crooked card games and carried a switchblade for protection. Some of his closest friends wound up behind bars.

"I wasn't sure where I belonged," he told The Times years later. "But when my best friend went to prison for hijacking a fur truck ... I realized I had to get on one side of the law or the other."

Yablonsky chose the straight path, using his rough-and-tumble youth as a springboard to a distinguished career: He became the "Sociologist With Street Smarts," as one headline described him, an authority on youth gangs, hippies and drug addicts whose personal experiences gave him insights other scholars lacked.

A longtime professor of sociology at Cal State Northridge, Yablonsky, who gained national prominence as a sociologist, criminologist and author, died Jan. 29 of natural causes at his home in Santa Monica, said his son, Mitch. He was 89. A leading figure in sociology in the 1960s and '70s, Yablonsky was known for his practical approach. He worked with members of New York street gangs in the tense "West Side Story" era of the 1950s, producing a socio-psychological study of "losers trying to be winners" in his first book, "The Violent Gang" (1962). His work treating drug addicts in Santa Monica with reformed alcoholic Charles Dederich resulted in "The Tunnel Back: Synanon" (1965), a provocative early study of the rehabilitation program before it took on cult overtones and became associated with violence.

He also worked extensively in prisons to rehabilitate inmates and in later decades testified in court cases as an expert witness. In 1993 his testimony rebutting a theory about the behavior of individuals in a mob helped put Damian Williams in prison for the brutal beating of truck driver Reginald Denny after the L.A. riots of 1992.

"He was very committed to the idea that sociology had a practical side to it and could make a contribution to society," said Vince Jeffries, a Cal State Northridge emeritus professor of sociology. "He was a very caring person, particularly toward those who made mistakes or were disadvantaged and could be helped toward a better life."

Born Nov. 23, 1924, in Irvington, N.J., he was the son of Harry Yablonsky, a Russian Jewish immigrant who drove a laundry delivery truck, and his Romanian wife, Fannie. In Irvington he endured anti-Semitic taunts; in elementary school in Newark, he was victimized because he was white.

"I learned early in my life the lesson of the sociopathic characteristics of senseless violence — and this understanding has served me well in my later work as a criminologist and gang

expert in the judicial process," he wrote in a 2010 memoir called "Confessions of a Criminologist: Some of My Best Friends Were Sociopaths."

In high school Yablonsky became a card and dice sharp. He was also a star athlete, who went to the University of Alabama on a baseball scholarship. He left after a year to serve in the Navy during World War II.

Kicked out of officer training for running card games, he served stateside and was honorably discharged in 1946. In 1948 he earned a business degree from Rutgers University, then drove to California, where he found a job inspecting lockers in bus and train terminals. Dismayed by the anti-Semitism of his co-workers, he quit and enrolled at New York University to study sociology, earning a master's degree in 1952 and a doctorate in 1957.

While working on his doctorate he counseled juvenile delinquents in Newark.

"Lots of social workers came from a sterile background," he told The Times in 1985. "But I felt right at home with jailed kids.... I figured it was my responsibility to tell society why these kids were violent, and at the same time to explain the attitudes of civilized people to the kids in jail."

In 1961, after teaching at the University of Massachusetts for three years, Yablonsky accepted a position at UCLA and began to study Synanon, which was gaining attention for its innovative treatment of drug addiction. He helped introduce Synanon members to psychodrama, a role-playing therapy he learned at NYU from its leading practitioner, Jacob Moreno. He was married for 17 years to Donna King, a former addict he met during a psychodrama session at Synanon. Their marriage ended in divorce. Besides son Mitch, of Santa Monica, Yablonsky is survived by a brother, Joseph, of Lady Lake, Fla. In 1963 he began a 30-year career on the sociology faculty at what is now Cal State Northridge. In 1967 he was one of two state college instructors honored for outstanding teaching by the system's board of trustees. In 2000 he received a career achievement award from the American Sociological Assn.

"He was an unconventional scholar," said retired Cal State Northridge sociologist Nathan Weinberg. "He wasn't somebody who was conducting statistical work. He was very hands-on." Yablonsky's research on the hippie movement was an example of what he called "live non-statistical research." After finishing the book on Synanon, he spent three years visiting communes from San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury to New York's East Village. He described his experiences in the counterculture and its effect on lifestyles and morality in "The Hippie Trip" (1968), which critic Robert Kirsch in a Los Angeles Times review called "a penetrating examination of the movement."

Although Yablonsky was opposed to recreational drug use, he tried marijuana and went on an LSD trip as part of his study. But he had limits.

When he found himself in a romantic setting with a young woman who had shed all her clothes, "middle-class square uptightness" came over him. "I got up," he recalled, "and took a walk."