



John Kretzmann, urban studies expert who put focus on a community's assets, dies at 78

By **Bob Goldsborough**

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John P. "Jody" Kretzmann was an educator and researcher at Northwestern University who challenged community organizers to achieve social change by considering a neighborhood's assets rather than what it lacked.

"He was an excellent trainer, researcher and organizer, and he became internationally known because of his shift in neighborhood focus from deficits to capacities," said John L. McKnight, a longtime collaborator. "He and I demonstrated that neighborhoods are filled with resources rather than with deficits alone.

John P. "Jody" Kretzmann. Kretzmann traveled around the world introducing the concepts of asset-based community development. (Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy)

Kretzmann, 78, died of kidney failure on Jan. 1 at a hospital in Green Bay, Wisconsin, said his wife of 48 years, Ingrid Christiansen. He divided his time between homes in the North Side Edgewater neighborhood and in Sister Bay, Wisconsin.

Born in Chicago, Kretzmann grew up in Valparaiso, Indiana, and was the son of longtime Valparaiso University President the Rev. Dr. O.P. Kretzmann. He received a bachelor's degree in English in 1966 from Princeton University, where he was the chairman, or editor-in-chief, of the Daily Princetonian newspaper. He also covered sports and editorialized frequently against the Vietnam War.

Kretzmann worked for a short time as a sports reporter for Time magazine, and received a master's degree in English literature from the University of Virginia in 1967.

In the late 1960s, Kretzmann lived in Oakland, California, where he resisted the draft during the Vietnam War and organized others taking similar action.

In 1969, Kretzmann was lured back to Chicago by a friend from Valparaiso, Walt Reiner, who asked him to help co-found an urban studies program that would help students understand racism, poverty and the war, Christiansen said.

Soon the Associated Colleges of the Midwest — a consortium of small Midwest colleges including Knox College, Carleton College, St. Olaf College and Lawrence University — asked Kretzmann and Reiner to start an urban studies program. The program, which Kretzmann led for a quarter century, immersed college students in Chicago neighborhoods in the morning and included afternoon internships that in many cases were at local nonprofits.

Among the ACM Urban Studies Program's instructors were journalist Salim Muwakkil and political activist Katy Hogan, who co-founded the now-shuttered [Heartland Cafe in Rogers Park](#). The program's noted alumni include former Chicago Ald. Joe Moore.

“Jody was a great intellect, combined with pretty much unadulterated love for the people. That was a rare combination, and he put his talents to work in a good way,” Hogan said.

While leading the Urban Studies Program, Kretzmann earned a Ph.D. in sociology from Northwestern University in 1985. The title of his doctoral dissertation was “The Politics of Information Reform in Chicago: An Experiment in Democratization.” Kretzmann also chaired the late Mayor Harold Washington's Neighborhood Planning Committee.

In 1995, Kretzmann and McKnight co-founded the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University. The two men previously had spent four years researching community-building initiatives in hundreds of neighborhoods around the U.S., which resulted in their 1993 book, “Building Communities Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets.”

At Northwestern, Kretzmann taught and, through workshops, also was able to put into practice his belief that sustainable community development could come from local assets, including local residents and associations, with the backing of local institutions.

“He really liked teaching at Northwestern, and that ABCD work was something that he had gradually codified in his brain about how work is best done with people,” Christiansen said. “He and John McKnight were honored to learn from and meet with community members who taught them about their strengths and assets, and to build on those gifts and assets.”

Kretzmann traveled around the world introducing the concepts of asset-based community development, including to such far-flung places as Namibia, Christiansen said.

Northwestern University professor of human development and social policy Dan Lewis called Kretzmann's life “a master class in humanity and humility.”

“Like the great teachers and organizers in Chicago history, he combined the gifts of hearing those that are often unheard and speaking with power and grace,” Lewis said.

“He was remarkable in so many ways,” said Chicago labor attorney Tom Allison, a longtime friend. “He was a terrific community organizer. He would work with communities to figure out how to address problems in their community.”

Kretzmann helped oversee the ABCD Institute’s move from Northwestern to DePaul University in 2016. A year later, he retired from the ABCD Institute after suffering a stroke, his wife said.

In addition to his wife, Kretzmann is survived by a daughter, Katie; a son, Marcus; and two brothers, Mark and Stephen.

A service was held.

Bob Goldsborough is a freelance reporter.