The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Michael P. Thomas, associate professor emeritus, psychology, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
CLARKE A. BURNHAM

Dr. Clarke Adams Burnham died peacefully at home on March 12, 2009. At the time of his death he was an associate professor emeritus in the Department of Psychology. Clarke had been responding well to multiple rounds of treatment for lung cancer and was active physically and mentally to the end.

Clarke was 71 when he died, having been born September 24, 1937. He was the eldest of six children born to Constance Mary Burnham and Ralph Adams Burnham. Clarke was raised in Watertown and Lexington, Massachusetts, where his father was an officer in a bank, and he spent his high school years at Philips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. The story is that Lexington High School was too easy for Clarke; he got an interview for entrance to Philips Exeter but was told there were no places available for the upcoming fall. Then they saw his score on their admissions test and space quickly became available. He was happier at Exeter than at Lexington High, although the socio-economic gap between him and many of the other students was sometimes uncomfortable.

Clarke began college at Harvard, quit to join the Army for two years where he served in Germany, got married to Lucy Eayrs, a 1960 graduate of Radcliffe, and then returned to Harvard to graduate Magna Cum Laude in the Department of Social Relations in 1961. For doctoral work, Clarke went to Stanford from 1961-65. He was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow for 1961-62 and held a predoctoral fellowship from the National Institute for Mental Health for 1962-65. Interestingly, two of his siblings also became academics: brother Scott is a professor of law at the University of Montana, and sister Abigail teaches English literature at Hunter College.

Clarke was rather a hot property when he was hired as an assistant professor of psychology at UT in 1965. For his dissertation at Stanford, Clarke worked with Leon Festinger, a highly influential and highly visible social psychologist, who was moving his research interests toward perception. Clarke was the first of Festinger’s “new wave,” and he came highly recommended by the Stanford faculty. Clarke’s interest was in efference, which is the issue of how the brain knows which sensory experiences are consequences of actions initiated by the person and which experiences come from the outside world. His dissertation was entitled Motor Efference and Visual Adaptation. While interviewing for the job in Austin, he already had an offer from the University of California at Riverside.

Clarke and Lucy arrived in Austin in 1965 with son Ralph on hip, Thomas was born in December of that year, and Scott arrived in 1967. Clarke began teaching courses in perception, experimental psychology, and statistics and set up his lab to continue his research on sensory-motor integration in the brain. He published half a dozen research papers in his first half-decade at UT, and he was promoted to associate professor in 1970. Then, tragically, Lucy died of a brain tumor in 1975, leaving Clarke with three young boys. He threw himself fully into being a single parent, and according to the boys, he did a characteristically excellent job, which included becoming skilled in the kitchen. In 1976, Clarke met and married Joan Gibson Mandel, and with her sons, Adam and Jeremy, they created a merged family of five boys under the age of 13. Lesser parents might have collapsed under that load, but Clarke and Joan came to thrive on the controlled chaos of their home. Both of them were fully involved in the upbringing of their children, and they were extremely proud of the lives and families each of the boys built. One of Clarke’s commitments was serving as Cub Scout leader for each of the
boys in succession. Along the way, Joan found time to complete her doctorate in educational administration from UT, and Clarke found time to collaborate with Michael Benedikt from the School of Architecture on a three-year research grant from the National Science Foundation on perceiving and describing space in architectural contexts. This work was an example of Clarke’s emerging interest in environmental psychology.

During World War I, Clarke’s maternal grandfather spent time on Birch Island in Casco Bay, Maine, and loved the region so much that he built a cottage on the island. As a child, Clarke spent time nearly every summer at Birch Island, and later he took his own family along on the annual visits to the Burnham family cottage. Often the treks to and from the cottage included sightseeing and camping along the way. Birch Island kept Clarke connected to New England, and indeed he possessed the stereotypical New England characteristics: he was quiet, competent, efficient, and frugal.

As an example of his competence, Clarke’s carpentry and home-maintenance skills were well known. He single handedly executed numerous major renovation projects, and at the end, he and Joan were supervising a major renovation of the kitchen, which they had planned and designed. He liked to talk about how nicely molding can cover calculational errors, but in fact there were very few errors for his molding to hide.

As one example of his frugalness, when he was negotiating with the chairman of psychology, Gardner Lindzey, about the open position at UT, Clarke requested start-up funds totaling $2,100 ($1,500 for lab expenses and $600 for subject money). This was well before the time of the substantial start-up packages now routinely provided for new assistant professors, but even for its time the request was so modest that The University gave him $4,000 instead.

Upon first meeting him, some people could perceive Clarke as stern, but it rapidly became clear—especially if you were in need of help—that he was exceedingly warm, perpetually upbeat, optimistic, and eager to solve a problem. The kindness, gentleness, and patience his children remember so clearly were characteristics others encountered as well. He had a wonderful deep voice, a hearty, ready laugh, an infectious smile, and always an eagerness to talk about new research findings and how they related to previous findings and beliefs. His breadth and depth of knowledge about psychology were truly impressive.

Among Clarke’s major contributions were his service to the Department of Psychology as both undergraduate and graduate advisor and his service to the University as chairman of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is responsible for overseeing all research on campus involving human subjects. During his time as undergraduate advisor (1972-78), the psychology department had about 1,000 undergraduate majors, and academic advising was not supported by special student fees, so Clarke had only one staff assistant. Undeterred by this lack of support, Clarke put in long hours and personally talked daily with a steady stream of students needing help and advice. Over the years, he helped thousands of students get educated in and graduate in psychology. By comparison, the number of undergraduate majors in psychology today is about 1,600, but they are advised by four full-time professional academic advisors.

Following this yeoman service as undergraduate advisor, Clarke served as graduate advisor for more than two decades (1982-2005), during which time he helped more than 330 students obtain doctoral degrees in Psychology. In spring 2000, he was named Outstanding Graduate Advisor by the College of Liberal Arts. Every graduate student who came through the psychology program during that time got to know Clarke Burnham, and they learned to rely on him when they inevitably needed help with the numerous administrative and other complications of life in graduate school. He was especially sensitive to the financial needs of graduate students and worked hard to find financial support for as many as possible. Each semester, he was in charge of matching graduate students requesting teaching assistantships with faculty members teaching undergraduate classes—a job requiring equal measures of Job and Solomon—and typically both parties were satisfied. Clarke had high standards and did not coddle poor students, but he did make sure that good students were not tripped up during their graduate careers by administrative or personality conflicts. He was especially adept at advising students about which faculty members to invite to serve on their dissertation committees; many students thereby avoided potential conflicts of opinion that could have slowed their progress. A fringe benefit to Clarke of being so deeply involved in the graduate program was the opportunity to stay current on a wide array of research topics in psychology. He personally chaired 10 doctoral committees and served on 31 others.
While still working as graduate advisor, Clarke became chairman of the IRB in 1996 after having served as a member of that committee for three years. From 1996 until he retired in 2005, he helped faculty and students from all across the University with the approximately 10,000 research projects that passed through the IRB. It is easy indeed to hear a Burnham story from nearly every long-term investigator on campus who has dealt with the IRB. Clarke had an impatience with bureaucracy that made him an ideal administrator. He was a vigorous advocate for principal investigators and students having technical problems with the system; he always had a solution, often an ingenious one, and never one that compromised principles or ignored the rights of the human subjects. He was devoted to common-sense solutions for bureaucratic problems.

Clarke retired in the summer of 2005 after 40 years at the University; he was named to emeritus status beginning with the fall semester of 2005. He continued to pursue his various interests by doing some ad hoc work for the IRB, creating an on-line course on elementary statistics for the University’s extension center, doing a number of repairs and renovations at home, and tending to his verdant garden. He continued to enjoy talking with faculty and students about their recent research findings and often was able to provide an historical perspective unknown to that investigator. Clarke and Joan visited family members across the country and took an extended trip to Europe in spring 2008. At what would prove to be his last Christmas celebration, Clarke and Joan cooked and served an entire meal for more than two dozen members of their beloved extended family. The pecan pie and gingerbread cookies were from Clarke’s grandmother’s recipes.

Clarke Burnham long will be remembered as a scholar, colleague, mentor, gentleman, and family man. He truly was a good guy who will be sorely missed.

The memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professor Dennis McFadden (chair), Professor Emeritus John Loehlin, and Professor Michael Domjan.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the executive vice president and provost, and the president June 15, 2009. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.