

Historian, public intellectual, and disability rights activist Paul K. Longmore died suddenly on Monday, August 9, 2010. His death interrupted an extraordinary spurt of creativity. His groundbreaking study of telethons and American culture was just a few paragraphs away from being a complete draft; he had recently learned that he had been awarded a prestigious Mary E. Switzer Research Fellowship to write a textbook on the history of the disability rights movement. He was in constant demand as a speaker, and in the week before his death he had appeared at several twentieth-anniversary commemorations of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Paul had united with a network of colleagues in the disability community to campaign for Barack Obama early in the primary season, and several of his friends had been rewarded with positions in the Obama administration, making it possible for him to shape federal disability policy. At age sixty-four, Paul was in the middle of a period of enormous productivity and influence.

The scope of his power and academic accomplishments might have been hard to predict when he was a child. He contracted childhood polio in the last epidemic to sweep through the United States, which left him with only limited use of his arms and a severely curved spine. He also possessed an astonishing memory, a brilliant mind, and a wicked, irreverent sense of humor. More than anything else, he possessed the dream of becoming a college professor of history.

The path to achieving that goal was not easy. Graduate programs refused to admit him because of his disability. He was denied a fellowship because, he was told, it would be a waste of money, since he would never be able to teach. Initially, the California Department of Rehabilitation rejected his request for financial assistance to study history, although they were

willing to pay for training him to become a computer programmer. Finally, they relented and granted him enough support to attend the least expensive public university in California.

However, Paul had been accepted to the Ph.D. program at Claremont Graduate School, which cost three times as much. With only partial assistance, Paul was unable to enroll as a full-time student, completing his coursework at a snail's pace. Then, the California D.R. threatened to end his financial aid altogether, claiming that he was taking too long. He persevered, crafting a fine dissertation that readily found a publisher. His first book, *The Invention of George Washington*, appeared in 1988, published by the University of California Press.

The successful publication of Paul's book triggered a new set of obstacles to surmount. Paul depended upon Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Medi-Cal to hire personal aides and to rent ventilators. However, the Social Security Act contained a provision that made it impossible to earn royalties from a book and still receive SSI. To highlight the injustice of this measure, Paul staged a significant protest in front of the Federal Building in Los Angeles, in which he struck a match to his book. Paul carefully orchestrated the publicity surrounding this event, mobilizing support. The upshot: the enactment of the "Longmore Amendment," which now makes it possible for people with disabilities to collect royalties for creative work and still retain their SSI. This incident is recounted in the title essay in the anthology that became Paul's second book, *Why I Burned My Book, and Other Essays on Disability* (2003).

Paul Longmore joined the SF State history faculty on a tenure-track appointment in 1992, obtaining the rank of Full Professor in 1998. He immediately proved that the naysayers who predicted that he could never teach were completely wrong. His classes in Colonial America, Early American Society and Culture, and the American Revolution were popular and compelling. He also started teaching a course on the history of disabilities. In 1996, he became

the founder and director of San Francisco's Institute on Disability, a center that promotes "interdisciplinary education, training, research and service in disability-related areas."

He threw his energies into the life of the history department and the university. To get an idea of his commitment and contributions, look at his *c.v.*, that bare-bones record of academic achievement. At last count, Paul's *c.v.* numbered some seventy-one pages, including numerous articles, essays, interviews, successful grant proposals, honors, and accolades. Some of the highlights include a major anthology, co-edited with Lauri Umansky, *The New Disability History* (2001), the Henry B. Betts Award (2004), and the Wang Family Excellence Award (2006).

Asked to summarize Paul Longmore's contributions to the university and community, SF State President Robert Corrigan commented: "Paul Longmore was transformational for the University, for the academic fields of history and disability studies, and for thousands of men and women whose lives he influenced. He devoted his life to making this a better and more just world." President Corrigan noted that it was hard to find a word that encompassed all of Paul's attributes: "Legendary, inspirational, pioneering, irreverent, . . . many words are needed to sum up this remarkable man." Then he went on to say, in words that are echoed by thousands of people in the Bay Area and throughout the world, "The most valuable to me are colleague and friend." Paul K. Longmore touched the lives of so many people, as a teacher, intellectual, activist, advocate, colleague, and friend.

There will be a campus celebration of Paul's life and accomplishments on Saturday, October 23, in the Seven Hills Conference Center, beginning at 2:00. Everyone is warmly invited to join in remembering this remarkable man.