

A Tribute to Dr. Robert Val Guthrie (1930-2005) from the
American Psychological Association

In his forthcoming autobiography, Bob Guthrie wrote about the “dragon slayers” of his youth: Black heroes of the sporting world like Joe Louis and of the military like those who served in the 99th Pursuit Squadron and the Red Ball Express, and of college professors like Joseph Awkard of Florida A & M College. These were individuals whose lives demonstrated the abilities and the courage of people of color in the face of Whites who, as Bob wrote, “had duped themselves into a fantasy of racial superiority.” Bob Guthrie became one of those “dragon slayers.”

Bob’s scholarship, in books like, *Even the Rat Was White*, articulated the oppressive legacy of racist science in psychology, but it did much more. Bob wrote about the many men and women, like Frances Sumner, Inez Prosser, Charles Thomas, Herman Canady, and Ruth Howard, who advanced psychological science and practice through their scholarship, their mentoring of students, and their contributions to their communities. In doing so, the possibility of a truly inclusive psychology was brought closer to realization.

Beyond his scholarship, Bob Guthrie contributed in so many ways to the creation of a healthier psychology. He was a valuable mentor, both in academia and in the military. He was a clinician whose insights and techniques were guided by a deep commitment to the worth of each individual and recognition of the importance of the particular social and cultural context of each individual’s life.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Bob Guthrie knew how to be a friend. His love of life and his willingness to share that with people he met endeared him to so many of us.

In the last paragraph of his autobiography, Bob wrote,

I recognize the cedar chest in my bedroom, full of folded American flags from family graves, each signifying military sacrifices and contributions made to America. I know that one day my flag will join them. Meanwhile, I have no desire to return to those days, high up in a Kentucky barn with my wobbly legs straddling narrow wooden rafters to hang poles of burley tobacco, or trying to explain the quality of my education, but I will continue eating grits, building model airplanes, playing my clarinet, hanging around libraries, eating watermelon and looking for a dragon to slay.

The entire family of the American Psychological Association mourns the passing of Dr. Guthrie, but we also celebrate his life, his many accomplishments, and his leadership in helping psychology to recognize its shortcomings, and in moving us toward becoming a more open, diverse, and relevant discipline for all.