



## **Susan M. Christopherson**

March 20, 1947 – December 14, 2016

Susan M. Christopherson, Professor and Chair of the Department of City and Regional Planning, died at her home in Ithaca on December 14, 2016. Dr. Christopherson, who joined the faculty at Cornell in 1987, was the first woman promoted to full professor in CRP, and the first woman to chair the department since its founding, in 1935. She was also a renowned economic geographer, and the author or co-author of over 100 scholarly and professional works on regional economic development, hydro-fracking, the movie industry, and other topics. She also served as an editor on numerous journals and other publication series, most recently as editor-in-chief of the Regional Studies Association/Taylor Francis Book Series on Cities and Regions, and directed many funded projects for governments, communities, and organizations locally, nationally and internationally. Susan's work examined how market governance regimes influence regional economic development and firm strategies. Her early insights on 'flexible specialization' in the movie industry have proven to be essential for scholars seeking to understand the forces behind the service-based 'gig' economies of today.

Susan was born in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1947, the first of eight children of Ralph, a police officer, and Paula Christopherson. She attended Catholic schools until deciding to switch to the public Murray High School in her junior year. Her first published writings were letters she wrote when traveling with two friends from high school to Latin America. The 18-year old's comments on Argentina and Chile were published in the *St. Paul Gazette*. After the trip, Susan enrolled at the University of Minnesota, from which she earned a Bachelor's in Urban Studies in 1972, and a Master's degree in Geography in 1975. Susan quickly became known for her political acumen, as well as her skills as a journalist (she was associate editor of *The Minnesota Daily*), and was assumed to be headed for an elected position in the Twin Cities. Susan worked on such projects as the pioneering Cedar-Riverside "New Town in Town" development on the edge of the

University of Minnesota's Minneapolis campus. Only 23 years old, she was hired to write the Environmental Impact Statement for the project. These experiences impelled her to pursue further studies at the University of California, Berkeley. In order to establish California residency and obtain affordable tuition, however, Susan first spent a year teaching school in the San Francisco Bay Area. She then enrolled at Berkeley from which she graduated with her Ph.D. in Geography in 1985. Her dissertation won the American Association of Geographer's Urban Specialty Group Annual Award. An assistant professor position followed at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she already held a position as a senior research associate. In 1987, she was hired by the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell, where she would teach for three decades.

Besides her regular affiliations with Berkeley and Cornell, Susan held numerous visiting and research appointments at other institutions, which significantly enriched her understanding of economic and regional development issues across myriad geographies. These positions included research associate in the Center for US-Mexican Studies at the University of California, San Diego (1982-1983); visiting professor in the department of geography at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel (1984); research associate in the Southwest Institute for Research on Women at the University of Arizona (1985-1990); adjunct research scholar in conservation of human resources at Columbia University (1987-1992); research associate at the Wissenschaftszentrum in Berlin, Germany (1992); visiting distinguished fellow, School of Management, Kings College, London, (2004); visiting fellow, St. Catherine's College, Cambridge (2007); Bousfield Distinguished Visitor in Planning and Geography, University of Toronto, Canada (2007-2008); visiting scholar, The Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies at Newcastle University, United Kingdom (2009); and the Simon Professorship at Manchester University, United Kingdom (2015).

At Cornell, Susan was also deeply engaged with colleagues and organizations across the university, including the Community and Regional Development Institute, from which she received the Faculty Contribution to Community and Economic Vitality award in November 2007. She was also a faculty fellow of the David R. Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future, and held the J. Thomas Clark Professorship for Entrepreneurship and Personal Enterprise, 2006-2011.

Susan's work as an economic geographer reflected her commitment to integrating scholarship with public engagement, which led to her passing being noted by numerous groups and activists working on development issues across the Central New York region—who saw her as a champion for the university's role of service to community. Her research and teaching focused on economic development, urban labor markets, and location patterns in media and other service industries. She recently examined the impacts of transporting fuel by rail, served on a National Research Council panel studying the impacts of shale oil on local communities, and reviewed submissions for Governor Andrew Cuomo's' Upstate Revitalization Competition. She conducted policy-oriented projects and international research in Canada, Mexico, China, Germany and Jordan, as well as multi-country studies. And Susan consulted with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the United Nations.

Susan's work was held in high regard nationally and internationally. Besides the many citations

of her writings one can find in the works of scholars across numerous disciplines, she received the: Best Book Award from the Regional Studies Association for *Remaking the Region, Labor, Power and Firm Strategies in the Knowledge Economy* (co-authored with Jennifer Clark) in September 2009. In addition, three books with articles by Susan also won book awards: Gray, L. and Seeber, R. (eds.) *Under the Stars: Essays on Labor Relations in Arts and Entertainment*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995, which was recognized as a “Noteworthy Book in Industrial Relations and Labor Economics”; A. Pike (ed.) *Whither Regional Studies?* New York: Routledge, 2009, which was awarded the Best Book Award 2010 by the Regional Studies Association; and Mark Deuze (ed.) *Managing Media*, which was awarded the 2011 Pickard Award for best book by the Association for Journalism and Media Education.

In December 2015, the Association of American Geographers gave Susan its Lifetime Achievement Honors award, “for her considerable and long standing contributions to economic geography research, public engagement, teaching, and service. Her work on media, optics, agriculture, renewable energy, and manufacturing has included deep engagement with local economic development authorities to produce research that contributed to spatially and socially balanced economic growth.” In November 2016 Susan also received the Sir Peter Hall Contribution to the Field Award from the Regional Studies Association in the United Kingdom. In making the award, Professor Ron Martin of Cambridge University said, “Over the years Susan has been a leading beacon in regional development studies, contributing some of the landmark papers in the field, and exerting a formative influence on both the theory and practice of economic geography internationally.” At the special session organized by Jennifer Clark in Susan’s honor at the AAG Annual Meeting in Boston in 2017, her colleague Meric Gertler, president of the University of Toronto, remarked on Susan’s “intellectual fearlessness and independence of mind,” and the fact that Susan often proffered arguments, based on her observations and research, that contradicted the received wisdom of the time—and would later be proven correct. Her colleague David Wolfe wrote: “What I admired most about Susan was her strong sense of political commitment to the values she believed in, without being either doctrinaire or preachy about them. Her commitment came through in her writing in a reasoned and measured way. She made her political points by marshaling empirical evidence to build a case, and by the strength of the arguments she constructed to support her positions. She was a model of how a deeply committed academic should act, with respect to both the conduct of their own research and their influence on the broader world around us. In this respect, she serves as a role model that we would want our students to emulate.”

Susan is preceded in death by her brother Mark and father Ralph Christopherson. She is survived by siblings, Tim, Peter, Paul (Deb), Charlie (Tara Sweeney), Marcia, Amy (Shane) Loomis, her mother Paula (Blake Sower), niece Rozlyn, nephews Nate (Siri), Joe (Matthieu), Grady, grand-niece Maria, and grand-nephew Per. In addition, Susan had meaningful and long-term relationships with several dear friends, especially Morgan Thomas and his wife Laurence, and Ned Rightor, a frequent collaborator.

In 2015, Susan wrote to her classmates from Murray High School: “My life priorities were different from those of many people -- I wanted challenging work, to learn about and to understand the world, and the opportunity to make a difference. Most of all, I wanted to be independent, to be able to stand on my own two feet. I have been lucky to take advantage of how

profoundly things have changed for women since the 1960s, and to have rewarding and interesting work from which I am not inclined or required to retire. I've worked hard for it, but I have attained my dreams and then some."

*Written by Jeffrey M. Chusid (Chair)*