Frank H. T. Rhodes, Cornell University’s ninth president, a national figure in higher education and an esteemed paleontologist, died February 3 in Bonita Springs, Florida. He was 93.

During Rhodes’ tenure as president from 1977 to 1995, Cornell saw significant growth in research and academic programs that continue to shape the university. Research funding more than tripled, from $88 million to more than $300 million; major initiatives in astronomy, supercomputing, biotechnology, nanofabrication and Asian studies were established; a successful $1.5 billion capital campaign was launched and completed; diversity at the university among students and faculty significantly increased; and the university’s international presence was strengthened.

When Rhodes stepped down in 1995, he had become a national leader, influential academic administrator and a formidable advocate for education and research, influencing the development of national science policy during the administrations of four U.S. presidents.

Rhodes was “an unparalleled leader, colleague and friend to generations of Cornellians,” said Robert S. Harrison ’76, chairman
of the Cornell Board of Trustees. “Frank led Cornell for 18 years – nearly unheard of today at major research universities, transformed Cornell’s national and international role – and even after stepping down as president continued to be an influential voice in higher education.”

“Perhaps most importantly, Frank cultivated permanent, lifelong bonds with multiple generations of Cornell faculty, staff and alumni,” Harrison said. “Eloquent, charming and an affable, peerless advocate for the university, he, along with his wife, Rosa, were frequent guests, attendees and cheerleaders at nearly every major Cornell event for decades.”

“Frank Rhodes was a brilliant scholar and a gracious leader who was not only deeply respected, but truly loved by generations of Cornellians,” said Cornell President Martha E. Pollack. “His boundless curiosity, his kindness and humor, and his sage leadership shaped Cornell as we know it today, as his wise and generous mentorship shaped the lives of the countless students, faculty and staff who passed through Cornell during his tenure. I am deeply grateful to have had the opportunity to benefit from his friendship and guidance in my early days at Cornell, and will always remember the warmth with which he welcomed my family into the extended family of Cornellians.

“I join Frank’s family and many friends in mourning this tremendous loss to the entire university community,” Pollack said.

Frank Harold Trevor Rhodes was born in Warwickshire, England, on October 29, 1926. He earned his bachelor’s, doctor of science and doctor of philosophy degrees in geology from the University of Birmingham, England. He taught at the University of Durham and the University of Wales, Swansea, where he also was dean of the faculty of science. He was a life fellow of Clare Hall, Cambridge, a visiting fellow of Trinity College, Oxford, and an honorary fellow of Robinson College, Cambridge.

In the United States, Rhodes taught at the University of Illinois and Ohio State University (as a Fulbright scholar and a National Science
Foundation senior visiting research fellow, respectively) before joining the faculty at the University of Michigan in 1968 as a professor of geology. In 1971, he was named dean of Michigan’s College of Literature, Science and the Arts and, from 1974-77, he served as Michigan’s vice president for academic affairs.

Rhodes was named Cornell president in early 1977, succeeding Dale Corson; he was installed as Cornell’s ninth president that November.

At his inauguration, Rhodes issued a call to Cornell and other research universities in the United States to work together to become “a new hope for humankind,” and he called on Cornellians to embrace “the power and priority of reason” and hopefulness in “the uncertain years that lie ahead.”

He stressed four “reaffirmations” necessary to secure a healthy future for the university: the power of reason; the strength of community that is Cornell; the priority of research and teaching; and the importance of the wider partnership beyond the campus.

Particularly notable accomplishments and events during Rhodes’ administration included:

- Rhodes had a deep commitment to creating educational opportunities for women and minorities, and diversity at Cornell among students and faculty increased significantly during his tenure. Underrepresented minorities as a percentage of the student body grew from 8% in 1977 to 28% in 1994, and the number of women and underrepresented minorities on the faculty more than doubled during the same time.

- A successful $1.5 billion capital campaign “super goal” was completed by 1995, due largely to Rhodes’ efforts to strengthen support for financial aid, educational programs and libraries. Cornell rose from eighth in the country in voluntary support in 1977-78 to third in 1992-93, and by the end of Rhodes’ presidency, ranked first in gift support from alumni and friends.
• New buildings and facilities built during Rhodes’ tenure include the supercomputing theory center (which was named Frank H.T. Rhodes Hall in his honor when he stepped down from the presidency), the Statler teaching hotel, the Biotechnology Building, the Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts, Snee Hall, the Carl Kroch Library, the nanofabrication laboratory, the veterinary medical center, the Akwe:kon Native American program house, and several athletics facilities.

• New programs in ethnic studies were launched (including American Indian, Asian American and Hispanic American), and new teaching programs like Cornell Abroad and Cornell in Washington were established.

Early in his presidency, Rhodes became an influential voice in national academic and university leadership. In 1984, he spoke to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Science and Technology, saying: “Research is the foundation of our national progress. Our economic strength, our industrial productivity, our cultural vitality, our people’s health, our international leadership, our national security – all these and more depend on it.” Support for universities engaged in “creative research and vigorous development,” he said, “… is the prerequisite for all other goals, the best hope for their achievement, the foundation for their eventual implementation, the basis of our national being.”

He also spoke about the importance of the role of teaching at major research universities: “We can cultivate the spirit of liberal learning only through the selection and nurture of faculty who regard teaching as a moral activity.” He later instituted a Cornell policy that made evaluation of teaching an essential part of tenure review.

“Frank Rhodes epitomized academic excellence, championed scientific inquiry, and led Cornell University so naturally, optimistically and gracefully for nearly two decades that he set the standard by which all research university presidents can be measured,” said Ezra Cornell ’70, Cornell University’s life trustee.
and a direct descendant of university founder Ezra Cornell. “I will cherish the decades I spent working with him to further the university’s mission. My heart goes out to Rosa, their daughters, and to Frank’s extended loving family.”

What might be Rhodes’ greatest and lasting success was his cultivation of lifelong connections with thousands of Cornellians.

According to “Cornell: A History, 1940-2015” by Cornell professors and historians Glenn Altschuler, Ph.D. ’76, and Isaac Kramnick, Rhodes played “an indispensable role in rekindling pride in Cornell among faculty, students and especially alumni,” serving as the university’s ultimate ambassador.

“Slim, handsome, and unfailingly gracious, Rhodes had a superhuman capacity to remember names and faces,” they wrote, and credited him with persuading the university’s board of trustees to adopt a management approach of “keep[ing] their noses in and their fingers out.”

Vice President Emerita Susan H. Murphy ’73, Ph.D. ’94, said: “Frank Rhodes taught all of us, especially those of us who had the privilege to work with him, how to lead and how to inspire. He did that by his integrity, his grace and his personal warmth. When you interacted with Frank, you felt as if you were the only person who mattered at the time. He loved and treasured Cornell, our faculty, staff, students and, especially, our alumni. He inspired Cornellians worldwide to share in that admiration and dedication. Our lives are richer because Frank Rhodes was part of them.”

At the time of his retirement, almost half of the university’s then nearly 123,000 living undergraduate alumni had attended Cornell while Rhodes was president. A celebration held for him and his wife, Rosa, in May 1995 included a parade and festival on campus with more than 200 student groups, athletic teams and university departments and units participating.

The Frank H.T. Rhodes Exemplary Alumni Service Award was established in 1994 in his honor. It is presented annually to honor
alumni who have demonstrated extraordinary, long-term volunteer service to the university, continuing their lives after Cornell as truly dedicated Cornellians.

Rhodes was professor emeritus of geological sciences and a lifelong paleontologist and Darwin scholar. He published widely throughout his career and for many years after his presidency in the fields of geology, paleontology, evolution, the history of science, and education. His books include “Language of the Earth,” “The Evolution of Life,” “The Creation of the Future: the Role of the American University,” “Earth: A Tenant’s Manual” and “Origins: The Search for Our Prehistoric Past.”

In the 1950s and ’60s, Rhodes had researched microfossils known as conodonts, which had long been useful as index fossils for working out the relative ages of Paleozoic rocks. But conodonts were then still mostly biological mysteries – only fragments of their structures existed, and they had puzzled scientists for decades.

As a postdoctoral researcher, Rhodes proposed new theories on their origins and assemblage and gave them new species names – theories that largely pointed the way to modern understanding of the eel-like marine creatures. Rhodes’ work in paleontology also illuminated, delineated and helped explain the mass extinction that defined the end of the Paleozoic Era.

Through his work as a geologist and naturalist, Rhodes also contributed to a greater historical understanding of British naturalist and evolutionary scientist Charles Darwin (1809-1882), linking Darwin’s early hands-on scientific work to his later evolutionary theory – an interconnectedness that Rhodes’ own scientific approach echoed.

Rhodes’ 1991 paper “Darwin’s Search for a Theory of the Earth: Symmetry, Simplicity and Speculation” marked the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin’s first major scientific theory and tied Darwin’s early geologic research on the formation of mountains and continental elevations to his later views on the origin of species.
Rhodes’ later work transitioned to a more holistic, planetwide viewpoint, focusing on sustainability and the Earth. This was crystallized in his 2012 book, “Earth: A Tenant’s Manual,” which explored the planet, from its place in the universe to the evolution of life on its land and in its seas.

In 1987, Rhodes was appointed by President Ronald Reagan to the National Science Board, of which he was a former chairman. In 1989, President George H.W. Bush named him to the President’s Educational Policy Advisory Committee.

Rhodes served as chairman of the governing boards of the American Council on Education, the Association of American Universities, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He also chaired the board of the Atlantic Philanthropies for eight years, helping to direct transformative philanthropy around the world on behalf of Cornellian Chuck Feeney ’56.

He was chairman of the 1987 National Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life, which produced the report “One-Third of a Nation,” and he was a member of the Association of Governing Boards’ 1996 Commission on Renewing the Academic Presidency and a member of the National Academy of Sciences’ Commission on the Future of the Research University.

Rhodes was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, served as a trustee of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and was a member and past president of the American Philosophical Society. He held 35 honorary degrees and was the recipient of numerous awards, including the Bigsby Medal from the Geological Society and the Ian Campbell Medal of the American Geosciences Institute in recognition of singular performance in and contribution to the geoscience profession.

Rhodes is survived by his wife, Rosa, four daughters, 11 grandchildren, and one great-granddaughter.

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