Michael (Mike) Larry Thonney, professor of animal science in the Department of Animal Science at Cornell University, died on April 23, 2021, in Ithaca, New York. He was 71.

Mike was born on June 2, 1949, in Moscow, Idaho and grew up on his great-grandfather's homestead just outside of Pullman, Washington. As a child and teenager, he enjoyed swimming competitively and showing Hampshire sheep from the family flock for 4-H and Future Farmers of America. He graduated in animal science from Washington State University in 1971 and received his M.S. (1973) and Ph.D. (1975) degrees in nutrition at the University of Minnesota. Mike joined the Cornell Animal Science faculty in 1975 and once he arrived on campus he never left, with the exception of four sabbatical leaves in Scotland, University of California at Davis, Massey University in New Zealand, and Washington State University.

For over 45 years, Mike taught and advised undergraduate and graduate students, conducted research, and engaged in extension programs. Mike took over direction of the Cornell Sheep Program in 1998 and served as director of Graduate Studies for the Field of Animal Science from 2013 until his passing.

Mike took an early interest in computers before they were commonplace at home or in workplaces. In 1980, he served on two computer advisory committees at Cornell and encouraged others to make use of the technology. His research included the effect of potential mature size on growth and body composition of sheep and cattle, biological control of long-bone growth, genes that affect differential muscle growth, genetics of seasonality of sheep reproduction, vaccination against diseases in sheep, and dietary effects of potentially fermentable fiber in growing lambs and lactating ewes.

Mike was deeply committed to the viability of small livestock farms. Mike’s more recent research and extension activities were oriented around the optimization of methods for feeding and management of milking sheep in year-round systems: When the Cornell Sheep Flock was
sharply reduced in 2016, Mike instigated its move directly onto campus and piloted practical methods to use meat sheep breeds for commercial sheep dairying. With a “can do” attitude, he established an on-campus, student-operated sheep dairy using tiny steps such as building a milking platform from scratch, providing his own funds for initial equipment. Thus far over 120 undergraduate students, many with no previous farm experience, and four graduate students, have learned to milk sheep, monitor lambing, artificially raise lambs, and feed and care for dairy sheep flocks under this program. In 2018, Mike transformed the Cornell Sheep Dairy from a research and demonstration operation to a Grade-A inspected commercial dairy that continues to sell ewe milk to small-scale creameries in New York and Pennsylvania. This transformation was accompanied by research into the link between levels of fermentable fiber in diets and the fatty-acid distribution in ewe milk as a determinant of quality. A great fan of sheep dairy products, he never missed a chance to promote his favorite locally produced sheep milk yogurts.

He initiated a brand-new Animal Science course, Dairy Sheep Management, and to date has taught 65 students, and more than 35 interns, volunteers, and student milkers how to milk, feed, and care for dairy ewes. The students, many with no previous farm experience, essentially ran the sheep dairy under this program. His excellent teaching and mentoring skills and obvious passion for the subject led many of his students to discover their own enthusiasm for sheep and small-ruminant dairying. Mike loved spending time in the barn and was especially adept at teaching lambs to quickly take a bottle and transition to lambars. The accessibility of the program has resulted in students, families, and others from the Cornell community regularly observing lambs on the Cornell sheep pastures. Mike was adamant that sheep grazing could mitigate the potential negative effects of land use change from agriculture to energy use and would contribute to solutions to climate change and habitat decline by their co-location with solar grazing. Through the efforts of Mike (and his dedicated collaborators, graduate students, interns, and farm staff), the Cornell sheep flock and Cornell solar farms have been instrumental in increasing livestock farmer knowledge of ways to diversify income through multiple use of livestock combining meat with dairy and co-location with NYS renewable energy projects.

Mike was honored with the National Association of Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture Teaching Award of Merit in 1997 and named the 2011 Shepherd of the Year by the Empire Sheep Producers’ Association, the 2015 Distinguished Graduate in Science, Education, and Technology by the Department of Animal Sciences at Washington State University, and the 2016 William J. Boylan Distinguished Service Award recipient by the Dairy Sheep Association of North America. Following his passing, a resolution celebrating his life and accomplishments was written and adopted by the New York State Senate and Assembly.

Although Mike often lacked patience for many aspects of University administration, he was tremendously committed to service. He served on numerous committees within the American Society of Animal Science, the American Meat Science Association, the National Cattlemen’s Association, the Dairy Sheep Association of North America, and the Federation of Animal Science Societies. In addition to his service as director of Graduate Studies for the Field of Animal Science, he served on many University, college, and departmental level committees. He was a member of the Cornell University Faculty Senate and the University Faculty Committee at the time of his passing.
Mike had an understated sense of humor that sometimes took people by surprise. He and his wife enjoyed folk music and regularly attended Bound for Glory for many years. Mike rarely missed a family gathering, especially if he could coordinate the visit with a nearby animal science meeting.

Mike was predeceased by his wife of 32 years, Patricia, and survived by his daughter Elizabeth of Houston, Texas and son Benjamin of Ithaca. He is also survived by his sister, Sarah Fortin and brother-in-law Ed of Mason, New Hampshire; brother, Steve Thonney and sister-in-law Kathy of Prosser, Washington; and sister, Janet Adams and brother-in-law Bill of Florence, Missouri.

Written by Thomas Overton, Nikola Kochendoerfer, Tatiana Stanton, and Elizabeth Thonney