

**Obituary for Thomas M. Conley**  
**March 8, 1941 – August 26, 2025**

It is with deep sadness that we announce the passing of **Thomas M. Conley**, Professor Emeritus of Communication and a distinguished scholar in the history of rhetorical theory, on **August 26, 2025**, at the age of 84. After a brief illness, he passed peacefully in Champaign, Illinois surrounded by his loving family.

Born on March 8, 1941, the oldest of seven children, Thomas M. Conley pursued his passion for classical rhetoric with unmatched dedication. An incredibly hard worker, and excellent student, he earned his undergraduate degree from Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, and his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago while tending bar at Jimmy's Woodlawn Tavern. Jimmy's was not only the backdrop for many fond stories, but also the place he met Elizabeth Goldsmith, a graduate student in English at the University of Chicago, who would later become his wife. They married at the University of Chicago Faculty Club in 1967, where they also celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2017.

He began his teaching career at the University of California at Berkeley in 1968, taught at S.U.N.Y. Albany from 1976-1979, and eventually went on to join the faculty at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1980, where he devoted his career to teaching, research, and mentorship. Upon retirement in 2010, he held the title of Professor Emeritus in the Department of Communication. His work profoundly influenced the study of Classical Greek rhetorics, the Byzantine rhetorical tradition, and the Renaissance reception of classical theory—especially in Central and Eastern Europe. He also contributed deeply to scholarship on Kenneth Burke and the enduring role of style in rhetorical invention and criticism.

Tom's research explored the continuity of rhetorical practice across centuries, and he authored numerous influential publications, including articles such as "*Cicero hunnicus: Miklós Oláh's Eloquent Attila*" and "*Rummaging in Walz's attic: Two Anonymous Opuscula in Rhetores graeci*." His work offered fresh perspectives on how rhetorical forms evolved across cultures and eras. He also wrote a textbook that continues to be an important resource for those in the field of rhetoric: *Rhetoric in the European Tradition*. And last, but certainly not least, he displayed his razor sharp talent for creative and insightful invectives by writing *Toward a Rhetoric of Insult*.

Beyond his formidable scholarly contributions, Tom was a dedicated educator and mentor. His passion for the classics and his clarity of thought inspired generations of students to appreciate the power of rhetoric in shaping ideas, identities, and history. He was known for holding court in the closest bar at the *International Society for the History of Rhetoric* (ISHR) conferences around the world, easily able to engage in continuous complex discourse while out-drinking any colleague or graduate student foolish enough to try to keep up. He was an amazing storyteller with a keen memory for every detail and regaled friends and family with the colorful stories of his childhood growing up on the west side of Chicago, and his young adulthood as a roofer and talented student of Greek and Latin.

Long before it was expected that husbands be equal partners in childcare and housework, Tom was one, even attending a Lamaze childbirth class on his own in order to meet California's qualifications for fathers being present in the delivery room. Tom was a wonderful and engaged father to both of his daughters, taking time to bring them on nature walks and cultural excursions, and, as the family cook, made their favorite meals whenever they visited home. He was a well-known MTD enthusiast, favoring the Blue Line for most of his 45 years in Champaign-Urbana. Not only did the bus take him to campus most days, but it allowed him to enjoy frequent visits to the Esquire Lounge with friends and colleagues.

He is survived by immediate family—including his wife of 58 years, Elizabeth Goldsmith Conley; his daughters Sarah Conley Odenkirk (Bill Odenkirk), and Anne Conley Goldstein (Marc Goldstein); and grandchildren Leo & Gideon Goldstein, and Linus and Audrey Odenkirk—as well as many colleagues and former students whose lives were enriched by his dry humor, unvarnished honesty, and the deep kindness that lurked just below his sometimes gruff exterior. His passing leaves a profound void in the academic community and in the hearts of his family and friends.

A celebration of life will be held at a later date so that friends and colleagues can gather to honor his life, celebrate his legacy, and reflect on the enduring contributions he made to the study of rhetoric and the University of Illinois. In lieu of flowers, please consider making a donation to the *Thomas Conley History of Rhetoric Award* at the U of I for graduate students wishing to attend ISHR gatherings by reaching out to Megan Wolf at [meganw@illinois.edu](mailto:meganw@illinois.edu) or online at [https://www.givecampus.com/campaigns/49556/donations/new?designation\\_id=11340857](https://www.givecampus.com/campaigns/49556/donations/new?designation_id=11340857).

*May his passion for knowledge and thoughtful discourse continue to inspire many.*