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Press Release
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MNABA Presents its Lifetime Achievement Award to University of Minnesota Retiring Professor Gail B. Peterson

Dr. Peterson has taught groundbreaking classes in Applied Behavior Analysis to several thousand students

Dr. Peterson’s career has been responsible for initiating the careers of the largest number of behavior analysts in Minnesota

PLYMOUTH, MN (September 26, 2014) – The Minnesota Northland Association for Behavior Analysis presented its Lifetime Achievement Award to Dr. Gail B. Peterson in recognition of his outstanding contributions to Behavior Analysis at its annual conference at the Crowne Plaza West in Plymouth MN.

Dr. Peterson retired this summer from his post as a Professor in the Psychology Department at the University of Minnesota where he has been instrumental in developing the ABA skills of so many, and in so many ways.

Even at the start of his career in 1972, he published an influential paper in the prestigious journal, “Science,” on conditioned approach to signals of electrical brain stimulation. He also has been recognized by the Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior for publishing one of the top ten most cited papers. This paper was a treatise on University of Minnesota Professor B.F. Skinner’s discovery of the fundamental principle of behavioral shaping, while conducting wartime research for General Mills in 1944.

But research aside, his contributions as a teacher have resulted in many students entering the field of Behavior Analysis. The field of behavior analysis is just beginning, with certification dating back only to 2001. Before that formal date, parents were desperate to find the staff they needed for their children’s treatment programs. In response, Dr. Peterson stepped in and visited family homes, posted job ads at the
U of M, inspired prospective students, submitted testimony to the state, and served on many valuable boards, all to get the job done.

Through his higher-level classes at the U of M, he taught ABA to several thousand students. Over 150 of his students went on to careers in ABA, many achieving supervisory status around the country, and some pursuing PhDs themselves.

One of his signature efforts was the chicken lab that he taught for many years. This hands-on experimental lab gave many a deep understanding of the parameters and techniques of reinforcement, and is remembered fondly by many.

As a result of his efforts many families today are able to access the still scarce ABA services they need for the treatment of their children who suffer from autism.

Gail has also received many other awards, including the Horace T. Morse – University of Minnesota Alumni Association Award for Outstanding Contributions to Undergraduate Education (in 2005); the Walter D. Mink Undergraduate Teacher Award from the MN Psychological Association (in 2004); and the U of M College of Liberal Arts Distinguished Teacher Award (in 1986).

He served on the Board of Directors of the Center to Study of Human–Animal Relationships and Environments (CENSHARE), at the University of Minnesota; and the Board of Directors of the Autism Recovery Foundation, Minneapolis, MN.

In presenting the award, MNABA, cited Dr. Peterson with this thought:

“Facts and formulations of facts change as science progresses. Yet the spirit of inquiry and the integrity of the scientist’s behavior should not change. In that we have Gail Peterson as a model. And while many of today’s facts and formulations may or may not occupy a large part of the legacy of behavior analysis, Dr. Peterson’s abiding contribution in producing so many behavior analysts will secure a lasting legacy that we can all share.”

Dr. Peterson received his B.A. from Mankato State College, Mankato, Minnesota, in 1966, his M.A. from New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico, in 1968, and his Ph.D. in Psychology from Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, in 1972.

He lives with his wife Judy, who has also retired from the University of Minnesota, in St. Paul, MN, and enjoys his time with his grandchildren and his dogs.

Publications mentioned:


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