Anthropology Spoken Here

For 35 years, Macalester students have schooled themselves in the 'rules' of another culture by taking one of the college's most distinctive, demanding and successful courses

by Jon Halvorsen

EVERY SEMESTER Macalester students fan out from campus to do anthropological field work in an area rich with microcultures: the Twin Cities. They conduct exhaustive interviews with a vast range of "cultural informants": police detectives and midwives, tattoo artists and Jesuit priests, legal secretaries and nightclub bouncers.

They learn anthropology in the most direct way: by *doing* anthropology.

In the past 35 years, more than 6,000 Macalester students have done research projects in anthropology using an approach pioneered by Professors James Spradley and David McCurdy; more than 1,000 students have taken the Anthropology Department's methods course, "Ethnographic Interviewing."

Until the 1970s, it was assumed that anthropology students would begin their field work in graduate school. McCurdy, who joined the faculty in 1966 as Macalester's first anthropologist, and Spradley, who arrived in 1969, made it possible for undergrads to do high-quality anthropological research in a single semester. Their textbook on how undergraduate research should be taught, *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society*, was published in 1972.

Now, 33 years later, the second edition has just been published, featuring ethnographic studies by a new generation of Mac students and recent grads.

"For anthropologists," McCurdy says, "there's a rite of passage where you learn to think in every situa-

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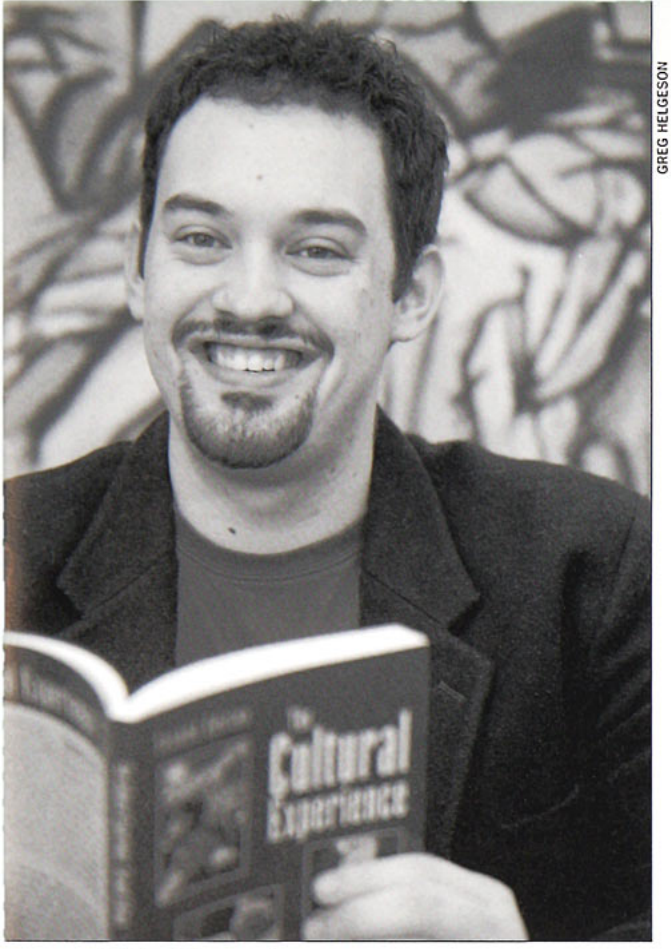
Jon Halvorsen is the managing editor of Macalester Today.



GREG HELGESON

Cole Akeson '05 **is one of 10 Macalester students and alumni who contributed to the new edition of** ***The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society.***

tion: 'What are the rules here? What am I supposed to do in this situation? How do I play this game?' Sometimes you can't figure out where people are coming from but there are always rules. One of the things students learn in this course—and the more they do it, the better they get at it—is just to see

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things from other people's points of view. In a complex world, it's really useful to be able to do that."

"Ethnographic Interviewing" requires students to study a microculture—a culture associated with a particular group—and discover through a series of interviews the particular cultural knowledge that the members of the group use to interpret their experience and relate to others. Students tape-record and transcribe at least seven, hour-long, face-to-face interviews, analyze their research and write a 30-page paper. (The American Anthropological Association's code of ethics also calls on them not to harm their cultural informants in any way and to protect their privacy; dangerous or illegal microcultures are off limits to Mac students.)

Professor Arjun Guneratne

"With a lot of other research projects in the social sciences, you have a hypothesis," says Professor Arjun Guneratne, chair of the department. "You don't have any hypothesis you want to test in this methods course. You are in the position of a student; your [cultural] informant is in the position of the teacher. What you want to do is to learn from your informant what it is like to operate in that setting—what are the rules, the inside knowledge of this cultural setting."

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A demanding, time-intensive course, "Ethnographic Interviewing" is usually oversubscribed. Cole Akeson '05, who interviewed a police detective for his study about the art of the police interview, believes the course is popular for several reasons: because it's so challenging, "because it's one of those courses where you learn a real, marketable skill ... [and] because it leaves students with a real sense of accomplishment ... the opportunity to pursue a semester-long research project resulting in a substantial and original work."

In 2002, three outside reviewers from Carleton, Brandeis and Union College wrote: "The Spradley and McCurdy method taught to Macalester students is widely recognized among anthropologists as valuable. What is so distinctive at Macalester is that undergraduates are being taught ethnographic research methodology so seriously. The experience is intense, intellectually and socially, and creates a remarkable esprit among the [anthropology] majors....As outsiders, we were extremely impressed with the success of this unusual course."

Dianna Shandy joined the Anthropology Department in 1999. A sociocultural anthropologist, Shandy says she feels "more like a facilitator or a coach than 'the expert instructor' imparting knowledge" when she teaches the course, which is required of anthropology majors.

"Students learn by doing," she said in an e-mail from Dublin, Ireland, where she was doing field work to learn more about the new African-Irish diaspora. "I think this course engages them differently than a lecture course might. They are pushed to take intellectual risks in a structured and supported environment. Ethnographic research demands a sort of intellectual freefall and students have to become comfortable moving forward with their projects without necessarily having a clear sense of where they will end up. I think these

The enduring Jim Spradley

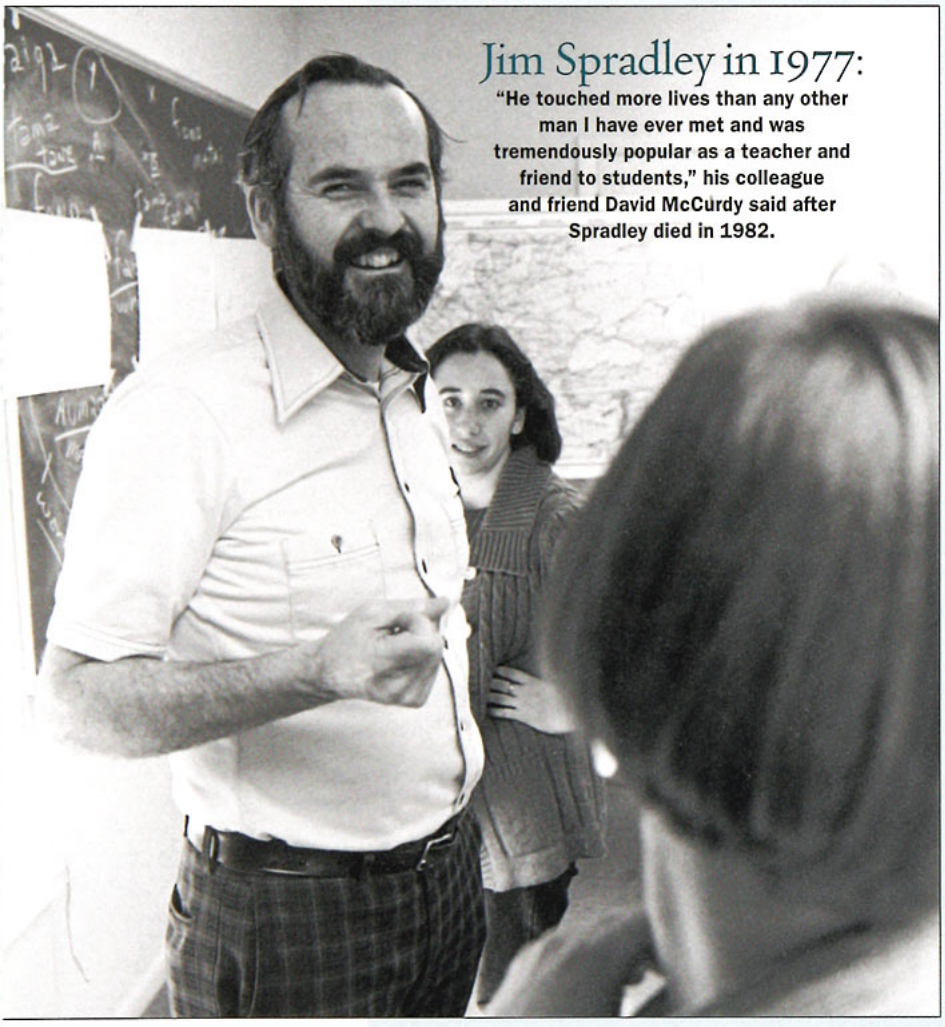
A charismatic teacher, he died young, but he left 20 books and many grateful students

Like a lot of anthropology majors at the time, Kimberley Brown '74 called herself "a Spradley major," after Professor James P. Spradley. "Literally, I took every course he offered," she says.

Jim Spradley taught at Macalester from 1969 until 1982, when he died of leukemia at the age of 48. Despite his all-too-short career, he had an enduring impact on many students.

"He pushed me early on to write well and to think well," says Brown, a professor of applied linguistics and international studies at Portland State University. "In my senior year I was trying to do too much and he recognized that. He made a lot of observations about me as an individual that were really powerful. I was so amazed that a faculty member would take the time to do that. He said, 'You spend a lot of time doing good work, but each time I see you in competition with someone else, you have stopped doing your best work, maybe because of fear of competition.'

"That's a very powerful insight to share with a 20-year-old, and he did that kind of thing routinely," Brown recalls.



Jim Spradley in 1977:
"He touched more lives than any other man I have ever met and was tremendously popular as a teacher and friend to students," his colleague and friend David McCurdy said after Spradley died in 1982.

Doug Harper '70 was so inspired by Spradley that in a nod to his mentor's first book—*You Owe Yourself a Drunk*, a study of skid row tramps in Seattle—he wrote his doctoral thesis on railroad tramps, for which he rode freight trains for 25,000 miles.

"I'm still a Spradley student," says Harper, chair of the sociology department at Duquesne University. "My current project is on Italian food. I've been going to Italy and trying to get Italians to define food. That's what Jim always got us to do—to think about the mundane, daily world in some new way, to become conscious of it and engage in it, to see its structure. He just bubbled over with excitement about learning the simplest things about people's lives. He taught us to have that same kind of interest and enthusiasm."

> 'He pushed me early on to write well and to think well.'

No one was more strongly affected by Spradley than the man who hired him, Professor David McCurdy. The two had met earlier at anthropologists' conferences. "I was just blown away by the great questions he asked me about what I was doing," McCurdy recalls. When Spradley taught a course at Mac on "ethnosemantics"—a precursor of what became the ethnography course—McCurdy sat in on his classes. "I said, 'I've got to learn how to do this,' so I took field notes of every class." The two became close friends and colleagues. Their reader, *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*, was first published in 1971. Now in its 12th edition, it has sold a half-million copies.

Spradley grew up in Los Angeles in a poor, deeply religious family; his father was a part-time Pentecostal minister. Jim memorized many Bible verses and was taught to summarize Bible chapters—a skill that came in handy when reading students' papers. "He was very supportive of students and quite demanding in his own way," McCurdy says.

A driven, charismatic man who became an authority on skid row tramps, occupational stress and deafness, Spradley wrote or edited 20 books in 12 years. Seven of them—including *Deaf Like Me*, written with his brother Thomas, whose daughter was deaf—are still in print today.

"I learned a lot about writing from him," McCurdy says. "I'm an editor basically by nature. He used to say, 'If you work on this chapter two more weeks, will it sell 20 more books?' He was very good for me. He wrote so fast that sometimes things would be disjointed, but the more he wrote the better he got. We went to lunch every day. We looked at each other's stuff, we talked over what to do about problems, we invented titles. We just had a lot of fun."

Spradley and his wife, Barbara, had three daughters, Sheryl Spradley Grassie '79, Deborah Spradley Mattingly '82 and Laura Spradley Harris.

—Jon Halvorsen

Professor Dianna Shandy

attributes are why the course is so effective in giving students a grounding for the research they undertake during study abroad."

Shandy was 5 years old when the first edition of *The Cultural Experience* was published. A co-author of the new edition, she was an undergraduate at Georgetown University when one of her anthropology professors introduced her to Spradley and McCurdy's work.

"However," she says, "what really sold me on the attributes of this particular way of teaching students were the 'testimonials' I received from Mac alumni who had taken this course in the 1970s and '80s. Now physicians, public health professionals, real estate agents, anthropologists, these Mac grads I encountered socially described the impact this course made on their intellectual development and continues to make on the work they do now."

Howard Sinker '78 became a journalist. A longtime reporter and editor with the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*—he also teaches a journalism course at Mac—Sinker uses an interviewing style that he learned in the ethnography course from McCurdy. "I found that it put interview subjects at ease and let them think they were directing the conversation. For me, there's no better way to ask open-ended questions, a key staple of the journalist's tool kit, than by using an ethnographic approach," Sinker says.

More recent grads share Sinker's appreciation of the ethnography course. "It's a unique course," says John Hoch '94, who works with kids who have behavior disorders as part of his Ph.D. studies in special education at the University of Minnesota. "You can use this way of learning about people's daily lives and apply it to anything."

Anne Hohol Becker '99, who is working in HIV prevention and education as a Peace Corps volunteer in Honduras, says the skills she learned have been a great help in understanding her new community in Trujillo. "By simply asking my neighbor or the owner of my local corner store an open-ended question such as 'Can you describe a typical day?', I can discover all sorts of things about their families, where they shop, how they make money, or if they go to church. Normally these types of questions are used when studying a microculture, but open-ended questions can help you learn a lot about people in general. And because the questions are simple and non-specific, I don't have to worry about asking a question that may offend someone."

Byron Thayer '02 says "the course has been a major springboard into my professional career in several ways." After an internship with IBM that drew heavily on the McCurdy-Spradley method for a marketing experiment, Thayer now works for a phone headset manufacturer in Berkeley, Calif., helping designers make headsets more user-friendly. "My toolbox has expanded since college to include ergonomics, but I still use the skills of participant-observation and ethnosemantic structured interviewing that I learned from that course in my work. If nothing else, the ethnosemantic skills have given me an unusual edge in the job market," Thayer says.

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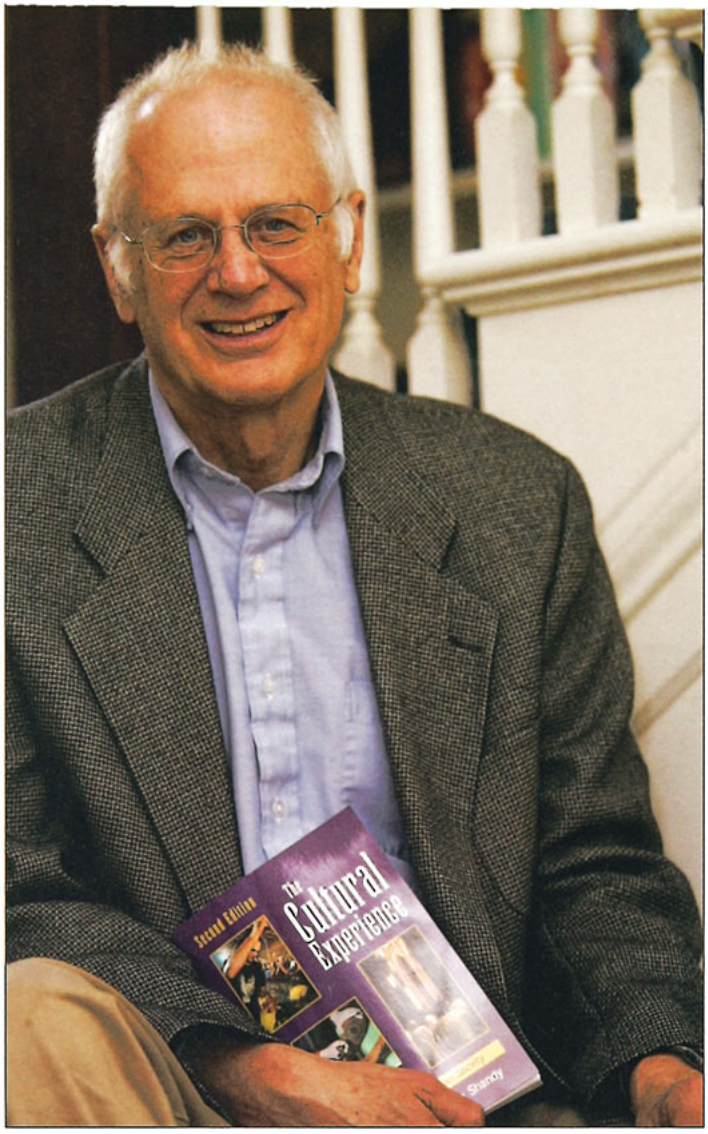

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Professor David McCurdy

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