

Legends and Legacies Book Chapters

---

10-1-2008

**Ellen R. Gritz, PhD**

Ellen R. Gritz PhD

*The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openworks.mdanderson.org/legendsandlegacieschapters>



Part of the [Oncology Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

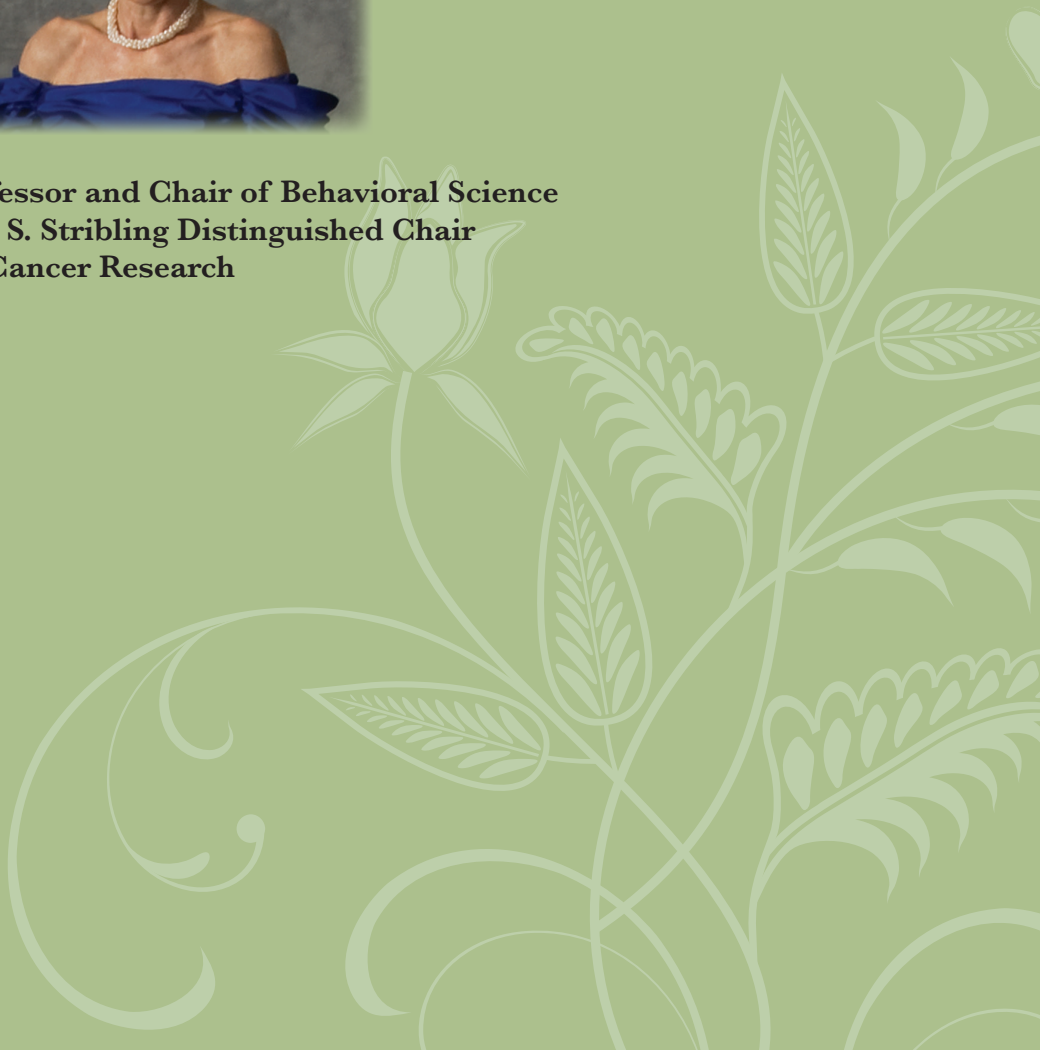
Gritz, Ellen R. PhD, "Ellen R. Gritz, PhD" (2008). *Legends and Legacies Book Chapters*. 8.  
<https://openworks.mdanderson.org/legendsandlegacieschapters/8>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by OpenWorks @ MD Anderson. It has been accepted for inclusion in Legends and Legacies Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of OpenWorks @ MD Anderson. For more information, please contact [rml-help@mdanderson.org](mailto:rml-help@mdanderson.org).

*Ellen R. Gritz, Ph.D.*



**Professor and Chair of Behavioral Science  
Olla S. Stribling Distinguished Chair  
for Cancer Research**





*Ellen Gritz and husband Mickey Rosenau, at right, enjoy dinner with colleagues in Kusadasi, Turkey, in 2006 while Ellen was president of the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco.*



*Mickey and Ellen had fun scuba diving off the coast of Sulanesi, Indonesia, in February 2005.*



*Ellen discussed health issues with Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton at an American Legacy Honors event in March 2006.*



*From left are Michael Fiore, M.D.; Ellen; former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, M.D.; and Susan Curry, Ph.D., at Koop's 75th birthday gala in September 2006.*



et's begin at the *end*, so to speak, which is *now*, with a really amazing event. I have just been elected to the Institute of Medicine, a branch of the National Academy of Sciences. Dr. John Mendelsohn, president of M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, has been the only IOM member at our institution; I have become the first woman faculty member to achieve this position. Did I *expect* this to happen? Not at all, which makes the honor and experience even more thrilling. Besides the personal feelings of accomplishment, what does this experience represent to me? As a psychologist trained in physiological, experimental and clinical psychology who has spent the majority of my career in comprehensive cancer centers, I am gratified by the acceptance of behavioral science as a mature career path and area of contribution to cancer research. Behavioral science is a *transdisciplinary* field — conducting research in cancer prevention and survivorship has led me into collaborations with colleagues in a variety of academic and medical disciplines, where all parties have been stimulated to learn much about each other's science. This integrative approach is the wave of the present *and* the future, and it is highly exciting to ride the crest.

I was raised in New York City, the grandchild of Eastern European immigrants fleeing the pogroms of the Czars and the child of parents who graduated from high school and then worked to support their elderly parents (in the case of my father) and male siblings who were attending college (in the case of my mother). I was the first in my immediate family to attend college. My younger brother was readily slated for medical school and is now a senior, community-based practicing radiologist. In my case, however, my parents envisioned me teaching elementary school. Nonetheless, my early ambition was to become a veterinarian, an interest that was probably stimulated by my love of animals, an affection with no known origin since our family apartment was too small for pets. While other girls read romance novels and Nancy Drew detective stories, I was studying cat and dog breeds and horse anatomy. I loved going to Madison Square Garden for the annual breed shows and equestrian competitions. The New York City school system had a special track for “gifted children,” which advanced me rapidly. Thus, by high school I was two years younger than many of my classmates. I attended the Bronx High School of Science, where I further developed my love of biology and voluntarily headed the “animal squad,” caring physically for the needs of a roomful of rats and mice, which I considered my pets. Sadly for me, many of them were used in scientific research and weren't around for very long.

By the time I got to Barnard College (women's college in the Columbia University system), my love of biology had led to a fascination with psychology and the brain. When I graduated in 1964 with a major in psychology, could

I have predicted my current career? Not at all — in fact, I had only the vaguest of career goals. I had always assumed that I would marry after college, stay home and raise children. However, nothing was further from the course that my life would actually take. In retrospect, attending a women's college provided well for my intellectual development and my initial flings at leadership (heading Barnard's upstate, rural camp site, among other extracurricular activities). However, even though Columbia College was directly across the street, at the time I would have preferred a coed school, since I enjoyed intellectual interaction with men. I certainly did encounter powerful women role models in the college leadership. In particular, President Millicent McIntosh stood out. She had earned a Ph.D. in English in 1926, raised five children, and served as Barnard's fourth president from 1947 to 1962. She inspired many undergraduates, including me, to set ambitious life goals.

When I graduated with honors from Barnard, I needed a break from intensive study, so I took a job at Bell Telephone Laboratories in Murray Hill, New Jersey. I had no help with finding this position. Rather, I found my job in *The New York Times* — literally. I spent an exhilarating two years at Bell Labs, a center of intellectual stimulation and pioneering research in communication. I learned computer programming in its most rudimentary forms (including machine language); made stereoscopic images for Dr. Bela Julesz, a famous scientist in the field of visual perception; and wrote a manual to teach FORTRAN, an early programming language. In addition to learning completely new fields in science, I started to mature emotionally, something that had been difficult to do living at home in Manhattan during my earlier schooling. I moved to New Jersey, was the first in my family to drive a car, had my own apartment, and joined the outing club, where I enjoyed white water canoeing, skiing, hiking and meeting like-minded souls.

At the end of two years at Bell Labs, my mentors there virtually propelled me to enroll in graduate school and suggested the brand new program at the University of California San Diego in La Jolla (UCSD). I received a full scholarship for the doctoral program and was in the first graduate class in psychology, where there were 12 professors and nine students. What an adventure — geographically, intellectually, emotionally and socially. The first six months that I lived in La Jolla, I floated along on a cloud, awed by the beauty of the Pacific Ocean, the tiny coastal towns, the opportunities to ski at Mammoth, hike in the Sierra Nevada, explore the desert, visit Mexico and swim daily in the ocean. Crowning the period was the incredible intellectual experience of having a very personalized graduate education led by a sterling group of professors, all of whom were also new to UCSD. I studied physiological psychology as a student of J. Anthony Deutsch, a brilliant scientist who guided me in work in the cholinergic mechanisms

of rat and mouse memory. I wavered about applying to medical school and wondered whether my true calling was really medicine. I was able to participate in several classes at the new UCSD medical school, including gross anatomy and neurology, and also to study neuroscience at the Scripps Institute of Oceanography; this period was probably the foundation of my commitment to transdisciplinary education. In the end, I stuck with psychology and after receiving my doctoral degree, I was hired by my first true mentor, Murray Jarvik, M.D., Ph.D., a leader in research in memory and learning, especially in relation to psychoactive drugs.

Murray had the classical inquiring mind — he was inquisitive about everything, and in a most charming and endearing manner. When he hired me to run his new lab at the Veterans Administration Medical Center, West Los Angeles and UCLA, he was in the process of moving his research activities from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City. Thus, we started out fresh, researching memory and learning in drug-dependent humans, particularly those taking methadone, a synthetic opioid used to “maintain” opioid addicts, and naltrexone, an opioid receptor antagonist used to treat opioid and alcohol dependence. Frankly, I was happy to leave animal research and move on to human subjects, my ultimate interest. At the same time, Murray had a long fixation on cigarette smoking, which had originated when he observed chimpanzees appearing to smoke the cigarettes given them by their keepers at the Yerkes Primate Research Center. Murray was the first American scientist to establish that nicotine is the primary pharmacologic reinforcer in tobacco smoke. We and other gifted colleagues (Drs. Nina Schneider, Saul Shiffman and Jed Rose) spent several years examining the reinforcing properties of nicotine as well as studying drug withdrawal. Our laboratory was located in Brentwood, the psychiatric portion of the VA Hospital, where we had access to many patients with substance abuse diagnoses and chronic mental illness — and where almost all the patients smoked cigarettes.

In 1975, my life took another major turn (remember Yogi Berra’s famous advice, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”) I met my husband of now 32 years, Mickey Rosenau. I had always enjoyed outdoor activities, including swimming, hiking, tennis and scuba diving. Thus, I joined the Sierra Singles, a group dedicated to self-extinction. Soon afterwards, I went on a canoe trip on the Colorado River and met Mickey, whom I would marry six months to the day later. Needless to say, we hit it off instantly, he proposed that very same day, and we were married in the presence of aging relatives and numerous friends on a beautiful lawn in Pacific Palisades, California, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Mickey had been married previously and had a daughter 11 years younger than me. The next year she graduated from college and married, and we became grandparents in

the course of good time (I call it “skip generation” grand-parenting). We did not have children of our own, which permitted us a great deal of freedom in career development, travel, and the evolution of our own mature interests in culture, the arts and global conservation.

After Mickey and I married, we each took a big step in developing our respective careers. Mickey, who has a background in engineering physics, had worked for sophisticated technology companies, first in a scientific and then in a managerial capacity. He wanted to set up his own business as a management consultant and leave the corporate world. My having a full-time academic position allowed him to do that, from a start-up status, quite successfully. Following that year, I, too, decided to fulfill my career ambitions in clinical psychology. I cut back on my research position to take the necessary classes in the graduate clinical psychology program at the University of Southern California, achieving licensure in 1979. At that point, I faced a decision about whether to leave research and seek a full-time clinical position or whether to combine the two. The lure of research remained too strong, so I established a part-time private practice for the next several years to satisfy my desire to be a psychotherapist. My primary appointment was still at the VA, where I was now chief of the Human Behavioral Pharmacology and Psychosocial Research Laboratory, and I had recently been promoted to associate professor at UCLA in the Research Series.

A major career opportunity arose in 1979, when I was invited to write the behavioral section of the first Report of the Surgeon General on Women and Smoking. That landmark 1980 report signaled the beginning of a 21-year association with the National Office on Smoking and Health and editorship on 10 Surgeon General’s reports, with several remarkable colleagues who remain good friends to this day (Dr. David Burns, Don Shopland and John Pinney). That experience led me to many national leadership opportunities in tobacco research and tobacco control at the National Institutes of Health and other organizations.

Also about that time, I began to realize that I wanted a closer affiliation at UCLA, particularly with the UCLA Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center (JCCC). Dr. Joseph Cullen, a psychologist who became a major figure in cancer control later at the National Cancer Institute (NCI), recruited me in 1981 to be the director of the Macomber-Murphy Cancer Prevention Program at the JCCC. Joe was another significant mentor who realized the critical role of tobacco in cancer prevention. My interest in women and smoking would gradually expand to other special populations, including medical patients and cancer patients in particular. Joe died suddenly and tragically of a brain tumor a number of years later, but he still looms large in the history of cancer control. I was honored to be the first recipient of the

Joseph W. Cullen Memorial Lectureship Award from the American Society of Preventive Oncology (ASPO) in 1992.

Another life-changing event was my husband's diagnosis with testicular cancer in 1981. This was long before Lance Armstrong made that disease a household name but, fortunately, quite soon after Dr. Larry Einhorn developed the famous "Einhorn regimen" of cisplatin, bleomycin, and vinblastine, which raised the cure rate from about 10 percent to over 90 percent. My husband's illness and curative treatment course (surgery plus chemotherapy) lasted less than six months but was to change the entire course of my professional life as well as strengthen our marriage significantly through trial by fire. I became much more interested in the psychosocial aspects of cancer treatment and survivorship and found a focus for applying my clinical psychology training and licensure to research and patient care. Indeed, several years later, I was awarded a grant from the American Cancer Society, California Division, to study the long-term effects of testicular cancer on individuals and couples, and, from this grant, a series of landmark papers were published. My husband and I vowed to live by the principle of *carpe diem*, and we have made quality of life and balance in our professional and personal relationships a hallmark of our lives together, one that has been ever more nourishing and replenishing.

I became a full-time faculty member at UCLA in 1984, bringing my career at the VA to an end. Over the next two years, I had two more outstanding mentors, Helene Brown and Dr. Lester Breslow. They served as the joint directors of the Division of Cancer Control at the JCCC between the time when Joe Cullen departed for the NCI in 1984 and the point when I became director in 1986. Lester, a giant in the field of cancer prevention and public health, taught me the value of having respect for all colleagues, particularly junior colleagues. He advocated hiring people smarter than oneself and letting them shine. That principle reflects well upon a leader. I still try to follow his advice. Helene Brown served as a role model of generosity and human relationships. She was an "oncopolitician," as she termed it. Helene had been a national leader in the American Cancer Society and was well versed in the role of the voluntary health organizations in cancer prevention and control, serving on many advisory committees at the NCI and other organizations. She outshone anyone I had known in the ability to care about every person in our organization and to show that generosity through frequent contact, personal communication and the expression of thanks for accomplishments. These critical qualities of leadership — recognizing the value of your faculty and staff and expressing your praise and appreciation — have served me well throughout my career.

As I became more active in cancer control and tobacco research, I developed a collegial base of behavioral scientists who were now also leaders



in similar types of research activities across the nation. Through this network of friends and colleagues, I came to understand that my academic career, in terms of rank and compensation, was significantly behind that of my peers. I can only say now that I was naive and idealistic in not pressing for advancement and higher pay earlier. What held me back was my modesty and belief that since my husband had a flourishing business, we were not in critical need of more income. Is this a typical woman's belief? It may have been then, but certainly it is not now — I hope! Seeking rewards more commensurate with my career stage, I applied for positions and received a very good offer from another university. However, I chose to remain at UCLA. I was promoted to full professor and received a change in university faculty series and a significant increase in salary. The new academic appointment was in Head and Neck Surgery, headed by Dr. Paul Ward, where I became a professor in residence. Dr. Ward, a visionary leader and teacher of surgeons, believed that behavioral science significantly enhanced the existing programs in basic science and clinical medicine in his department. This appointment was another transdisciplinary experience in my career, one that I dearly loved. It included clinical psychotherapy practice with cancer patients as well as the research I had been conducting with colleagues in surgery and maxillofacial prosthodontics. Our smoking cessation study in this cancer patient population was another landmark in the literature.

My final career relocation came in 1993, when M. D. Anderson Cancer Center recruited me to found the first academic department of behavioral science in any comprehensive cancer center in the nation, a status it retains to this day. I can honestly say that I was bowled over by M. D. Anderson — its vision and mission, size, structure, patient population, clinical and research opportunities, and outstanding faculty. I was simultaneously looking at several other positions, but M. D. Anderson won, hands down. My husband had the flexibility to move his management consulting firm at will, so relocation was not a significant barrier for him. We were unusual in that respect: moving spouses, particularly male spouses, is often a deal breaker for senior women faculty. We sold our house in Los Angeles and moved to Houston over the Memorial Day weekend in 1993, accompanied by our aging cat, Sasha. We lived in an apartment while we built a contemporary home, another dream we fulfilled. Outside, a large garden and my 100-plus orchids in their greenhouse connect us to nature daily. Along the years, after Sasha passed away, we adopted Tenzing PurrBall and Lady Godiva, two adorable and eccentric kitties.

I have spent the past 14 years at M. D. Anderson building and developing my own research program as well as the Department of Behavioral Science. Beginning with one faculty position (mine), the department has grown to 24 faculty (in tenure and non-tenure series) and a total workforce of more than

100. My own research in smoking prevention and cessation has continued, most recently adding a new population of interest: persons living with HIV/AIDS. This group has more than doubled the smoking prevalence of the general public (50 percent versus 21 percent) and can derive important and potentially life-saving benefits from stopping smoking. Other research programs that I have developed since coming to M. D. Anderson include skin cancer prevention through sun protection interventions among healthy pre-school children and in families of melanoma survivors; psychosocial aspects of genetic testing and counseling for hereditary non-polyposis colon cancer; and a prospective study of neurocognitive function in testicular cancer patients treated with high-dose chemotherapy. This last study was the first grant awarded by the Lance Armstrong Foundation, and thus it has had special meaning for me.

Even more meaningful than the maturation and expansion of my own career and research accomplishments have been the satisfaction and pride gained from the successful development of my department. Being a department chair at this dynamic institution is challenging, demanding and gratifying. Mentoring postdoctoral students, young faculty and new faculty as they come to our cancer center is an ongoing and consequential role. Putting behavioral science on the academic map of a cancer center requires demonstrating the value of our work and its transdisciplinary connections to the basic and clinical sciences and to other fields in the population sciences. Our scientific accomplishments involve changing behavior: reducing risk factors in healthy community-dwelling persons, designing strategies for those at elevated risk for cancer as well as those with cancer, and improving quality of life of patients and survivors. Disseminating effective interventions and reaching underserved populations is a high-priority aspect of behavioral science research.

Another intensely rewarding leadership activity at M. D. Anderson is the Faculty Health Committee. In 2001, two colleagues (Drs. Georgia Thomas, chief of Employee Health, and Walter Baile, section chief of Psychiatry at that time) and I conceptualized a faculty health program that would focus on prevention of burnout and distress, promoting work-life balance and introducing a range of wellness activities into faculty programming. We undertook this initiative with the full support of Dr. Mendelsohn and the other M. D. Anderson senior leadership following the tragic suicide of a physician colleague. Over the past seven years, along with a strong committee and institutional resources, we have built a multidimensional and vibrant program, which now has a full-time director in a faculty position in my department. The program includes: a completely confidential and free psychotherapy resource outside M. D. Anderson that is available to faculty and immediate family for assessment, brief intervention and referral;

numerous lectures and seminars on topics related to stress, burnout and wellness; a range of experiential programs on topics such as meditation, mental fitness and work-life balance; and education for faculty leaders on how to recognize and deal with distressed or potentially impaired faculty. A strong aspect of the program involves its sponsorship of periodic artistic performances. These have included an annual piano concert and lecture delivered by a well-known musician/psychiatrist and focused on the life of a great composer who had a significant mental or physical illness; a concert of opera arias and duets exemplifying illness and death, performed by Houston Grand Opera studio artists and narrated by accomplished interpreters of the history of opera and operatic music; jazz performances; and upcoming dance recitals. Not only has leading this program been a tremendous pleasure for me personally, but also I feel I have made an important contribution to my colleagues and to the institution in this role.

I have received a variety of meaningful honors and awards in the course of my career. Serving as both the president of the American Society of Preventive Oncology, from 1993 to 1995, and the president of my professional organization, the Society for Research in Nicotine and Tobacco, from 2006 to 2007, had provided incredibly important and enjoyable experiences, allowing me to exert some personal degree of leadership in my discipline. At M. D. Anderson, I have received the James W. Elkins Faculty Achievement Award in Cancer Prevention, the Business and Professional Women's Award of Texas, and three endowed positions: the Annie Laurie Howard Research Professorship, the Frank T. McGraw Memorial Chair in the Study of Cancer, and most recently (2005) the Olla S. Stribling Distinguished Chair for Cancer Research. Finally, election to the Institute of Medicine in October 2007 has been immensely gratifying.

Throughout my career, achieving a balance between work and personal life has been a high priority, strongly reinforced by my husband's experience with cancer 27 years ago. Together we have explored the natural world, traveling widely, hiking three times in the Himalayas (in Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim), and scuba diving across the Asia-Pacific (in the Maldives, Philippines, Malaysia, Solomon Islands and many times in Indonesia, our favorite destination). We are active in Houston's cultural and artistic offerings. I am a devoted opera aficionado and sit on the Board of Trustees of the Houston Grand Opera. We attend and support ballet, modern dance, chamber music, the Museum of Fine Arts and the Houston Zoo. Personally, I swim 1.5 miles daily, which keeps both my mind and body in shape. While my dad passed away from prostate cancer in 1991, my mother is in excellent health and celebrated her 100th birthday in 2008. I hope that I can follow in her footsteps!

