

# Jean M. Arsenian

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*The Boston Globe*

August 3, 2007



Jean MacDonald Arsenian, a psychologist whose 1940s research into children's attachments to their mothers influenced top researchers, traded the comforts of academia to treat drug addicts at Boston State Hospital in the 1960s.

"A lot of people wouldn't do what she did. She was just terrific with these young people. They thought the world of her and knew they could trust her," said June Johnson-Wolff, a psychiatric nurse who met Dr. Arsenian at the hospital and became a close friend.

Dr. Arsenian, who scaled back her career to bring up two sons and support her husband's pioneering work in group therapy at Boston State, died July 23 at her seaside Rockport home. She was 93.

Her health had declined following the Jan. 31 death of her husband, fellow psychologist John Arsenian, to whom she had been married for 65 years.

"After her husband died, life didn't hold its glow any more," Johnson-Wolff said.

But on June 8, Dr. Arsenian was determined to attend her Radcliffe College Class of 1935 reunion. Against the advice of her son, a cardiologist, she arrived and entered the luncheon with the aid of her cane, wearing one of her favorite silk scarves.

She sat with the only two survivors present from her class to hear keynote speaker author Toni Morrison, said Dr. Arsenian's daughter-in-law, Kelly, who accompanied her.

Kelly said her mother-in-law rarely spoke of her most noted paper, "Young Children in an Insecure Situation," which appeared in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* in April 1943.

"She was more proud of her work with addicts," Kelly said. "She was extremely humble. She would talk about herself only if you drew it out of her."

Soon after she was born in Avoca, Iowa, Dr. Arsenian's father, the Rev. Rosmond MacDonald a Presbyterian minister, and her mother, Margaret (Webster) moved to Massachusetts and settled in Springfield.

Dr. Arsenian grew up in Springfield and in Quincy, where she graduated from high school. She earned her bachelor's and master's degrees from Radcliffe followed by a Ph.D. from Radcliffe in 1940.

She was a psychology instructor at Scripps College in California from 1939 to 1941, when her dissertation was under review and she met John Arsenian, a Harvard graduate student who was on the panel reviewing her work.

"He criticized it quite a bit," Kelly said.

"She came back to challenge his opinions, and he fell madly in love with her."

Dr. Arsenian then went to work as an assistant psychology professor at what was then called Florida State College for Women from 1941 to 1942.

According to family lore, John chased her to Florida and tried to win her heart one day at a pool by executing a spectacular back dive to impress her. They married in 1942.

She studied childhood attachment issues by observing how infants behaved when placed alone in a playroom and when they were placed in a playroom with their mothers.

"She made it quite clear that the ones brought in with their mothers could take a constructive interest in the environment -- while the others spent most of their time crying. I always remembered that, "developmental psychologist and attachment expert Mary Ainsworth told *The Atlantic Monthly* in a 1990 article.

Ainsworth said Dr. Arsenian's work laid the foundation for her groundbreaking studies of the 1960s.

In 1945, Dr. Arsenian began teaching at Wellesley College and was an assistant professor from 1947 to 1952.

She later worked in the drug treatment unit at Boston State Hospital, where her husband was chief psychologist and director of clinical psychiatry for almost 30 years. Boston State was closed in 1979.

"I was a teenager when she got involved in the early years of drug addiction treatment at Boston State Hospital," said her son Michael of Rockport, a cardiologist on the North Shore.

"It was down-and-dirty front-line work, and she enjoyed that. Her unique characteristic was being able to see the best in everybody, even people whom the rest of the world was very down on."

The couple brought up their sons with no television in the home and spent many nights reading aloud from classic literature. The tradition continued after the children had left home and the Arsenians retired.

The couple spent most of their lives in Brookline and bought a second home in Rockport in 1959. Both homes were decorated with art made by Boston State Hospital patients as therapy.

They moved to Rockport year-round in the 1970s, where they were loyal members of the

Great Books Reading Group at the local library. Dr. Arsenian was a devoted member of the Rockport Unitarian Church and loved caring for her rose garden.

When John became disabled from Parkinson's disease, his wife was his primary caregiver.

"As a tiny, old frail woman, she cared for him," Michael said.

In addition to her son Michael, Dr. Arsenian leaves another son, Toby of Rockport, and three grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockport at a later date.