

# Ruth Hubbard Cousins, May 21, 1920 – January 11, 2007

by Virginia Andreoli Mathie, PhD, Psi Chi Executive Director

*Psi Chi sadly announces the death of Ruth Hubbard Cousins on Thursday, January 11, 2007. Ruth Cousins led Psi Chi for 33 years, starting in December 1958 as Executive Secretary. In 1969 her title was changed to Executive Director, and she continued in this position until October 1991. In 1981 Ruth and her daughter Carol Tracy cofounded Psi Beta, the National Honor Society in Psychology for Community and Junior Colleges. The Psi Chi community mourns the loss of this exceptional leader, gracious lady, and dear friend; and extends its deepest sympathy to Ruth's daughters, Carol Tracy and Joan Cousins, and all of Ruth's family. At the memorial service in Chattanooga on January 14, 2007, I paid tribute to Ruth on behalf of Psi Chi. Ruth will be buried on February 5, 2007, beside her husband, James Franklin Cousins, in Arlington National Cemetery. Memorial contributions may be made to the Southeast Tennessee Chapter Alzheimer's Association, 735 Broad Street, Suite 300, Chattanooga, TN, 37402.*



## Ruth Hubbard Cousins

Ruth Hubbard Cousins was born in Waleska, Georgia on May 21, 1920. Her parents, Charles Turner Hubbard and Frances Boston Hubbard, were both teachers. Ruth was one of six children. She grew up in Tifton, GA and went on to complete her bachelor's and master's degrees at George Washington University (GWU; Hogan & Sexton, 2000). She married James Franklin Cousins in 1941, and they had two daughters, Carol and Joan. In her interview for Psi Chi's oral history (Davis & Wertheimer, 2000), Ruth recounted that in 1958, one of her professors at GWU, Dr. Eva Johnson, urged Ruth to take the position with Psi Chi. Ruth, still a graduate student at the time with two young daughters, had planned to work for Psi Chi for only one year (Cousins, 2000). After the untimely death of her husband in 1959, however, Ruth decided to stay at Psi Chi—a decision for which the Psi Chi community is forever grateful! From the time she started in 1958 until she retired in 1991, Ruth was more than just the Executive Director of Psi Chi; Ruth was Psi Chi. She ran every aspect of our society and did so with exceptional competence, uncommon dedication, unconditional love, and a unique ability to anticipate the needs of our society and our members and ensure that we had what we needed before we even knew we needed it.

Psi Chi was a family affair for Ruth. During Ruth's first year, her husband Jim helped Psi Chi get on solid financial footing by establishing a bookkeeping system for the organization, filing the organization's first tax form, and financially supporting the organization (Hogan & Sexton, 2000). She even recruited Carol and Joan to help with typing, filing, stuffing envelopes, and putting stamps on the envelopes. Both daughters continued to play an active role in Psi Chi. Carol served for many years as Psi Chi's financial officer. Joan accompanied her mother to several American Psychological Association meetings to assist with the Psi Chi program.

Ruth's distinguished, visionary leadership of our society is unparalleled in Psi Chi's history, and I

suspect in the history of any honor society or psychological association—or any professional association for that matter. Edwin B. Newman, a cofounder of Psi Chi, said in a letter to Ruth in 1989, “Far more than most people realize, Psi Chi is not what we founded, it is what you have made it” (E. B. Newman, letter dated August 13, 1989). And indeed, it was due to Ruth’s vision, commitment, perseverance, and skill that in 1965 Psi Chi was admitted to the Association of College Honor Societies (ACHS) and made the transition from an honorary fraternity to one of the largest disciplinary honor societies in the world. She quite literally made Psi Chi the national honor society in psychology. Not content to have this enormous impact on students at 4-year colleges and universities, Ruth worked with her daughter Carol to cofound Psi Beta, the National Honor Society in Psychology for Community and Junior Colleges. Ruth was instrumental in persuading ACHS to admit 2-year honor societies to the organization.

Ruth led Psi Chi through the turbulent times in the 1960’s by using her special gift of being able to connect with students to encourage them to use their skills as researchers to help improve society and bring about change through peaceful, constructive political action. She talked with great pride about the impact she had on students at one university during the 1960’s and how gratifying it was to her to know that she could be a positive influence on the lives of students (Cousins, 2000). Ruth was a strong advocate for the importance of psychology education. She worked tirelessly to expand the reach of Psi Chi to more schools and to advise chapters on ways to increase student involvement in psychology and in the Psi Chi chapters. Under her skilled and dynamic leadership, Psi Chi grew from 25,000 life members in 130 chapters to 221,573 life members in 734 chapters.

Ruth’s leadership was recognized by many professional associations. Ruth was one of the first women invited to join the then all-male National Press Club in Washington, D.C., and the first woman to serve on the board of the Washington, DC Society of Association Executives (Wilson, 1991). In 1991 the American Psychological Association (APA) made Ruth the first lifetime Honorary Full Member of the APA (Wilson, 1991). In 2001 the APA presented Ruth with a prestigious APA Presidential Citation. The citation summed up so eloquently Ruth’s contributions to and impact on the field of psychology. Included in the citation were the following statements: “Due to your devotion and effort, thousands of students of psychology have been honored for their achievements and inspired to continue to study and work in their chosen field. Your efforts have inspired and positively influenced the lives and careers of many thousands of psychologists, past, present, and future. You are an inspiration for all who study and teach in the field of psychology.”

On a more personal note, I had the honor and pleasure of meeting Ruth for the first time in 2004 shortly after I took my position with Psi Chi. Carol Tracy took me to visit Ruth, and we had a delightful afternoon talking about Ruth’s experiences in Psi Chi and looking through the memory book that Psi Chi had presented to Ruth when she retired. Ruth was as gracious and enchanting as everyone told me she was. Even at that point in her life, she still had that mischievous twinkle in her eye when she pointed out the “handsome beau” who was in several pictures and wanted to marry her! There were many pictures of Ruth and the most famous psychologists of the time. It was clear she held a special place in their hearts. By the time I left that day, Ruth had a special place in my heart as well.

The legacy of Ruth Hubbard Cousin will live on not only in her wonderful family but also in the Psi Chi family she led and nurtured for so many years. We are indebted to Ruth for making Psi Chi the organization it is today. Because of her vision, dedication, perseverance, and stalwart commitment to academic excellence, scientific scholarship, honor, honesty, and integrity, Psi Chi continues to grow and prosper; we continue Ruth’s commitment to encourage, stimulate,

and maintain excellence in scholarship in all fields, particularly in psychology; we continue to help students engage in the field of psychology and develop their own leadership skills; and we continue to recognize and honor the achievements of all Psi Chi members through awards such as the Ruth Hubbard Cousins National Chapter Award. But the success Psi Chi and its members have achieved and will continue to achieve would not be possible without the leadership and guiding hand Ruth provided for so many years. She has been and will continue be Psi Chi's angel, sitting on the shoulder of every Psi Chi Executive Director and Executive Officer, that gently, wisely, lovingly whispers in our ear and guides us along the path she forged so that we can try to live up to the remarkable standards she set for all of us. The Psi Chi community mourns the loss of Ruth Hubbard Cousins even as we celebrate the invaluable and enduring contributions she has made to Psi Chi. We will miss her very much. Members of the Psi Chi community extend to Ruth's family our deepest sympathy at the loss of such a remarkable woman and leader.

## References

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- Cousins, R. H. (2000). Ruth Hubbard Cousins. In S. F. Davis & M. Wertheimer (Eds.). *An oral history of Psi Chi: The National Honor Society in Psychology* (pp. 35-40). Chattanooga, TN: Psi Chi.
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- Wilson, K. (1991, Special Issue). A tribute to Ruth Cousins from the incoming Psi Chi executive officer. *Psi Chi Newsletter*, 17(5), 4-5.

For more information about Ruth Cousins, you may also read her online obituaries at The Washington Post (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/27/AR2007012701316.html>) or at Chattanooga.com (<http://www.chattanooga.com/2007/1/12/99640/Cousins-Ruth-Hubbard.aspx>).