Memorial Resolution for
Professor Emerita Ruth McGaffey

Professor Ruth Michelsen McGaffey died on May 19, 1998, after a decade-long fight against lymphoma. She was born in 1933. She spent her childhood living in various cities and towns in North Dakota, Minnesota and Washington. She graduated from St. Olaf College in 1953, received her master's degree from the University of Nebraska in 1955. She received her Ph.D. from Northwestern University in 1970 with a dissertation on free speech and the first amendment.

Ruth joined the faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1964 as director of forensics and an instructor in what was then the Department of Speech. During the next twenty-four years, she taught public speaking, argumentation and Freedom of Speech. Professor McGaffey’s achievements in debate at UWM included developing a team of debaters that won $10,000 in scholarships in “The GE College Bowl” television program in 1965. In 1970, her UWM debate team beat the defending champions from UCLA. She also developed the “Popcorn Forums” in the late 1960’s to promote discussion and debate on subjects ranging from the Vietnam War, race relations, and feminism. She retired in 1988 as a full professor, having served coach of numerous debate and college bowl teams, Chair of the Communication Department, and as the Executive Assistant to the Chancellor.

Ruth’s passion was the First Amendment. She was a prolific scholar and the recipient of numerous academic awards. She received the Ernest Spaights Plaza Honor from UWM in 1997, the Wichein’s Award for Scholarship in Speech and Law from the Speech Communication Association in 1987, and the Andrew Weaver "Outstanding College Teacher" award from the Wisconsin Communication Association in 1980. She was the Van Zeist Distinguished Visiting Professor at Northwestern University in 1985-86, she was selected as an Outstanding Alumna by St. Olaf College Forensics on the occasion of its 100th Anniversary, and she was selected as the Constitutional Scholar by the Wisconsin Humanities Committee.

Ruth was an outstanding university citizen. She loved teaching and research and she influenced the lives of countless students and colleagues. She will be missed by her many UWM friends.