Dr. Gilbert Kushner, academic pioneer at USF

By Marty Clear, Times Correspondent

TAMPA - From his youthful years as beatnik, singing protest songs on the streets of Greenwich Village in the 1950s, to his decades as a nationally recognized leader in academia, Dr. Gilbert Kushner's life was guided by an abiding faith in mankind and a devotion to oppressed people.

Strong willed and hard working, Dr. Kushner came to the fledgling University of South Florida in 1970 and turned its anthropology program into a groundbreaking and internationally influential force.

Dr. Kushner passed away Sunday from complications of lung cancer. He was 76.

He had started, at USF, the first graduate program in applied anthropology in the nation.

"It was the first of its kind, and people from anthropology departments around the country came to see how USF did it," said Curtis Weinker, a longtime friend and colleague of Dr. Kushner's. "As a result of what he did, many, many universities now have doctoral programs in applied anthropology."

Applied anthropology uses anthropological techniques to solve practical problems, from race relations to urban planning.

"He was a pioneer in anthropology education," said Alvin Wolfe, another friend and colleague. "There had always been applied anthropology. People like Margaret Mead and Ed Spicer were involved in applied anthropology. But you got a lot experience and then went into applied anthropology. Before Gil, no one ever thought to teach it."

He was born in the Bronx, but spent his early childhood in Palestine, where his father had taken a job. The family came back to New York when Gilbert Kushner was 4 or 5.

"When they came back, he didn't speak English," his son David said. "All he spoke was Hebrew and Yiddish. They held him back a year in school. But he was bright, and I believe he later skipped two grades."

He lived in New York through his college years, in the days of the burgeoning beat movement and folk scene.

"He was one of those guys who sat in Washington Square playing guitar and singing union songs," David Kushner said.
Dr. Kushner attended graduate school at the University of North Carolina and actively participated in civil rights protests, including sit-ins at businesses that wouldn't serve African-Americans. That didn't win him many friends at his Southern university, but he was more concerned with social justice than with his grades or his career.

While in North Carolina, he and a partner recorded and released a record of folk songs, under the name Mike and Gil From Chapel Hill.

He later studied with anthropology professor Spicer at the University of Arizona. Dr. Kushner shared Spicer's passion for American Indian culture, but he chose to study the Jewish community in Tucson. It was an unusual type of subculture for an anthropologist to study at that time. But it set the tone for Dr. Kushner's career. He was fascinated with what he called "persistent peoples" - groups that survived and fostered their cultural identity despite being displaced and persecuted.

He joined USF's anthropology department in 1970 and became its chairman the following year. He served in that position for 14 years, and was associate dean of USF's College of Social and Behavioral Sciences from 1971 until 1978.

Within USF, he was known for his passion for his field and for social activism.

"Anthropology (is) not only a scientific and humanistic discipline, but a way to contemplate humankind's place on Earth," he wrote.

He also known for a ram's horn he kept in his office. When someone from the department received an award or published a major paper, Dr. Kushner would go to the department office and blow the ram's horn, literally trumpeting his colleague's accomplishment.

"You'd hear that sound in the anthropology department, or in the rest of the building, or outside in the parking lot and you'd know it was Gil Kushner," his son said.

Outside the university, Dr. Kushner may have been most widely known for a high-profile murder case. In 1973, his 11-year-old son Jonathan was kidnapped and murdered. In the wake of that tragedy, Dr. Kushner and his wife Lorraine founded victims support groups in Tampa that are still in existence today.

His vision for a graduate program wasn't simply ahead of its time, colleagues say, it was controversial. Even Margaret Mead objected to his plan to have a master's program instead of a doctoral program, which would have been the norm in that era. And within Florida's university system, the more powerful universities thought that upstart USF was not the place for something so innovative.

But Dr. Kushner was not easily dissuaded.

"He was a very strong-willed person," Wolfe said. "He was determined.

"If he had an idea, he would stick with it until he got the job done."
Marty Clear can be reached at mclear@tampabay.rr.com.

**Biography**

**Gilbert Kushner**

**Born:** July 7, 1933.

**Died:** May 30, 2010.

**Survivors:** Wife Lorraine Kushner; sister Esther Fram; sons Andrew and David; and three granddaughters, Alyssa, Samantha and Mia Kushner. Dr. Kushner was preceded in death by his parents and his son, Jonathan.