



**Janet E. Kodras** is professor of geography at Florida State University, where she has taught human and political geography for twenty-three years. A graduate of the University of Georgia

and Ohio State University, her work is focused on the study of poverty, hunger, and welfare across the diversity of labor markets in the United States. Editor of two books and author of forty articles and chapters, she was Associate Editor of the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, served as a member of the NSF geography advisory panel, and as a member of the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Geography. Janet has won numerous awards for her research, teaching, and service to the discipline, including AAG Distinguished Service Honors. In 2000, Janet, at age forty-eight, suffered a stroke which affected her speech and mobility. After two years of rehabilitation she returned to part-time work at Florida State in Tallahassee, where she lives with her husband and eight-year old daughter.

**AAG: What do you hope to accomplish in your research?**

**Jan:** I believe that poverty and hunger are geographic experiences. While there are many who see inequality as the result of personal weaknesses, I see humans as players in a place-bound set of interactions that govern distributions of opportunities, income, and other resources. U.S. programs to address social injustice, like food stamps and global food aid, are used selectively to serve purposes sometimes little-related to inequality. I hope to foster more realistic and effective public and private programs to address poverty and hunger by helping to produce better understandings of the multi-scaled processes that generate these conditions.

**AAG: How can such an understanding contribute?**

**Jan:** For example, assertions that people are hungry out of ignorance can be summarily dismissed. Attributing poverty solely to individual deficiencies such as laziness and low aspirations falters when

the spatial dynamics are considered. The changing map of American poverty does not represent an ebb and flow of lassitude among the nation's population. It mirrors transformations in the country's economic and political geography, the structural landscapes of prosperity and poverty molded by the market and the state.

**AAG: Can geographers influence the public debate?**

**Jan:** I believe that a geographic perspective can powerfully inform public debates over policy. With its emphasis on the interaction of phenomena across scales and its grounding in both social and natural sciences, geography can make a wide-ranging contribution to an understanding of the interlocking issues that affect the future of this country's well-being.

**AAG: You have also been active in catalyzing other research on the issue.**

**Jan:** Yes, I also organized the Geographers Network on American Politics. It was an informal group of about seventy-five geographers who studied the geographic dimensions of attempts to restructure the U.S. government during the 1990s. As a group, we coordinated and disseminated research on the effects of that process for people living in different geographic contexts and sought to strengthen the links between geography and public policy.

**AAG: What achievement are you most proud of?**

**Jan:** As director of graduate studies, I was active in making the case for the creation of our PhD program at Florida State ... I see the doctoral program as having transformed our department, simultaneously increasing our capacity to teach geography to undergraduates and enriching our production of quality ideas.

**AAG: What has the AAG meant to you?**

**Jan:** The AAG provided me with various types of support and inspiration. As a graduate student I participated in the Political Geography Specialty Group, which allowed me to interact with people beyond Ohio State. The job listings in *AAG Newsletter* helped me move to the next stage in my career. As an assistant and associate professor, I was inspired by famous geographers at AAG conferences. As a full professor, the AAG provided a

forum for my ideas and readily accepted my energies, such as when I served as National Councillor and Secretary.

**AAG: Why do you enjoy being a geographer?**

**Jan:** Geography gives me tools to work toward useful policy changes; it gives me a departmental community of colleagues with whom I share common purpose; and it gives me an excuse to see the world. What other career would allow me to draw professional growth from a bicycle trip through the Yangtze River valley, or canoeing on the Amazon?

**AAG: How has your stroke influenced your career in geography?**

**Jan:** The first weeks after having the stroke, I was unsure of my future. Then, as part of a therapy excursion to a mall, I pushed my new wheelchair into a bookstore where I caught sight of a best seller on nourishment for the brain. I opened the book, eager to find ways to facilitate my recovery, and read an argument about how human evolution was stymied until people migrated to the Great Lakes region of East Africa, where they consumed Omega-3 oil from the species of fish found in the lakes. The old debates about environmental determinism came back to me. I became angry that I wasn't still active in promoting a scientifically-based understanding of place. I knew that I had to return to the classroom and to geographic scholarship.

**AAG: Your work routine must have changed a lot.**

**Jan:** I am much slower at reading and writing now, but I still enjoy the regular activities of academic geography. I read the discipline's journals, attend the meetings, and complete the requisite reviews, etc. I don't do much talking at faculty meetings these days.

**AAG: And your teaching?**

**Jan:** I lecture using computer voice like Stephen Hawking did. And now I know much better why I have to do this work, and why geography is important. Students are kind to say I inspire them, but I think they give me far more, as it's now absolutely clear to me that my students are my voice to the world. ■