In Memoriam: John Bennett "Ben" Olson, 74, artist, retired biology professor

John Bennett "Ben" Olson, 74, died Saturday, January 4 in his home at 320 Brown St., West Lafayette. He had been in failing health the past year.

He was a professor of biology at Purdue University from 1964 until retiring in 1981.

Dr. Olson, an artist, founded the Watson's Crick Gallery in the Lilly Hall of Science on the Purdue campus, and he was an active member of the University Visual Arts committee. He also led workshops in creativity for people of all ages, including the Lafayette Urban Ministry camp program and at Circle Pines Center in Michigan.

He came to the university to direct the National Science Foundation master's degree program and held a joint appointment between the departments of biology and education. For many years, he served as head of biological sciences for the Purdue regional campuses.

As president of the Indiana College Biology Teachers Association, Dr. Olson led a successful effort to defend the First Amendment by filing suit to prevent the state of Indiana from adopting a religious text for use in teaching biology to public high school students.

Before joining the Purdue faculty, he taught at Brooklyn College, San Jose State College and Shimer College, where he was chairman of the natural sciences division. His research included study of heart defects while he worked at Children's Hospital in Los Angeles, and of the central nervous system while he worked in the lab of Linus Pauling at Cal Tech. In 1983, Dr. Olson's doctoral thesis and specimens of the microscopic marine organisms that were the object of his study were incorporated in the invertebrate collection of the Smithsonian Institution.

Dr. Olson served as a lay minister for the Unitarian Fellowship, and later he and the Rev. Leo Haigerty organized the Science and Theology seminar, which continues at the Wesley Foundation.

He was a Red Coat volunteer at Home Hospital, played flute and tap danced with the Cherry Lane Dudes at local events, the senior citizens center and nursing homes. Dr. Olson was an army veteran of World War II.

Born Feb. 13, 1917, in Minneapolis, Minn., he grew up in South Bend and Rockford, Ill., and came to the area from Mount Carroll, Ill., in 1964. He graduated from Beloit College, Beloit, Wis., with a degree in biology. He continued his studies at UCLA and earned his doctorate in invertebrate zoology from Scripps Institution of the University of California.

He married Dorothy Daggett in Los Angeles in 1942. She survives.

Also surviving are three daughters, Mrs. Alfred (Loren Olson) Pounders of West Lafayette, Mrs. Sydney (Christina) Spiesel of New Haven, Conn., and Mary Olson of Washington, D.C.; two brothers, Munthe Victor Olson of Palm Desert, Calif., and David Darrel Olson of Paradise, Calif., and a sister, Mary Lou Branaum of Hemet, Calif.