

Obituary / Obituaire

In Memoriam: Georgina Feldberg

On 10 July 2010, Dr. Georgina Feldberg (born in Calcutta, India on 30 April 1956) lost her four year “challenge”—a word she consciously used to avoid military metaphors—against multiple myeloma. When I visited her at Princess Margaret Hospital in the weeks before her death, she showed no sign of relinquishing her struggle with the disease, once declaring to me that she was uninterested in talking about plans for her death because she was concerned with only one thing: living. It is this vitality that I will miss most about Gina. As her husband, Robert Vipond, put it in her obituary, Gina was “elegant, funny, feisty, charming, impatient, generous, stoic, [and] principled to a fault.”

Most of the articles written in Gina’s memory have focused on her important contributions as a scholar. She made significant contributions to the fields of medical history, women’s health history, and health policy. I would like to use this space to broaden the narrative on Gina’s professional life and talk about what she meant to her students, as both a mentor and a teacher. I was fortunate to be Gina’s graduate student and my dissertation was the last one she saw through to completion in August 2009. It is difficult to put into words how much Gina’s supervisory role meant to me. She took me under her wing during the first year of my PhD as I struggled to understand the history of medicine and figure out what I wanted to write about for my dissertation. She read and commented on multiple drafts of my thesis, found me research work when I was broke, hooked me up with people to stay with when I was doing research in Cambridge, and even gave me her daughter’s old baby clothes. Put simply, Gina was the best supervisor I could ever ask for. Even as she struggled with multiple myeloma, she remained dogged in her commitment to me, always finding time to write me reference letters, have a chat with me on the phone about work or our kids, and, in the final stages, pushing me to sharpen my analysis and hand in something that I would be proud of.

The four graduate students she continued to mentor up to the time of her death is a testament to her commitment to her students. Likewise, the breadth of the topics each of her students researched—genetic screening in Canada, the role of physicians and scientists in the American anti-nuclear movement, AIDS activism in Canada, the history of cervical cancer screening, the Abortion Caravan, and the history of food

and nutrition—is a testament to her widespread expertise in medical history, the history of science, women’s health history, and health policy.

I am not alone in my assessment of Gina as an excellent teacher and mentor. University of Toronto, Health Policy Professor, Fiona Miller, who was Gina’s first graduate student at York University, notes that for her Gina “modelled the historian as social scientist and policy scholar.” She remembers that she “worked diligently to shadow Gina as she intervened in then-urgent debates about health services restructuring and women’s health.” According to Miller, her relationship with Gina reinforced her “belief that history as a discipline, and history of medicine as a content area, had methodological, theoretical and substantive contributions to make to contemporary debates.”

Shannon Stettner, another of Gina’s graduate students as well as a former teaching assistant, recalls, “Her lectures were so rich. She worked hard to engage her students—not only by making the material relevant to their lives, but by challenging them to make those connections as well and to think critically about health and medicine. She was engaging, intelligent, funny, and dedicated—everything a good teacher should be.” Stettner also reflected that “More than any other person I’ve encountered during my graduate studies, Gina always made me feel like she believed in me and my ability to not only finish my dissertation, but produce a worthwhile contribution to my field. Her words were always the perfect balm for all the little hurts or injustices you encounter as you make your way through graduate studies. She had a remarkable way of putting things into perspective.”

Ian Mosby, whose research on food history was very near and dear to Gina’s heart, reflected, “Even at the depths of my uncertainty over my ability to complete (or even start!) my dissertation, I would always come out of meetings with Gina feeling a renewed sense of self-confidence and a million ideas for new directions that I could take my research. She demanded a considerable amount of intellectual rigour from her students but, more than anything, wanted us to do what we found interesting and warned against getting caught up in the current academic fashion or what we thought others might expect from us.”

Jim Clifford, who wrote a lovely tribute to Gina at activehistory.ca, described being her student in the graduate course “Science, Health, and the Environment,” where he was inspired by both her scholarship and her commitment to using history to shape current policy.

Gina also left an indelible mark on her undergraduate students, even those who took courses with her over the last two years of her life, when teaching sapped such a large amount of her limited energy. Kelly Weiss took Gina’s fourth-year seminar in public health policy in 2008/2009 and recalls, “Professor Gina Feldberg’s seminar was always a positive environment where students were comfortable participating and engag-

ing in course work. For me, she always encouraged 'doing my homework' (be comprehensive) when it came to research and assignments ... She also gave me great advice on my difficulties with public speaking."

The model of excellence set by Gina for us, her students, has positively influenced us all. I know I, in particular, use the examples of her generosity, her empathy, her brilliance, and her humour as the measures of quality in my own teaching.

LISA RUMIEL, SSHRC Post-Doctoral Fellow, McMaster University

News / Nouvelles

YEAR 2012 LAUREATE OF THE HISTORY OF ANESTHESIA
DORIS K. COPE, M.D., CHAIRMAN
www.woodlibrarymuseum.org

Nominations are invited for the person to be named the fifth Wood Library-Museum Laureate of the History of Anesthesia in the year 2012. Deadline for receipt of nominations is 1 July 2011.

This program, established in 1994, has as its purpose increased recognition of the richness and importance of the history of our specialty by recognizing the work of scholars who have made singular contributions to the field. The honour is awarded every four years by the WLM Laureate Committee to an individual who has a demonstrable record of contributing over the years outstanding, original materials related to the history of our specialty as reflected by articles published in peer-reviewed journals, and/or in monographs. The first Laureate, Dr. Gwenifer Wilson of Sydney, Australia was honoured in 1996. The second Co-Laureates were Norman A. Bergman, M.D, FRCA, and Thomas B. Boulton, M.D., Ch.B., FRCA in 2000. The third Laureate was Donald Caton, M.D. in 2004, and the fourth Laureate was David J. Wilkinson, MB, BS, FRCA. The Laureate Program is international. Nominations are sought by physicians, not just anesthesiologists, as well as medical historians from the international history community.

Additional information may be obtained by contacting the WLM Laureate Committee at the Wood Library-Museum, 520 N. Northwest Highway, Park Ridge, Illinois 60068-2573. Please see the WLM website, www.woodlibrarymuseum.org for more information.