

Memorial Eulogy for Dr. Sharon Silbiger

Victor L. Schuster, MD

Department of Medicine, Montefiore Medical Center, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, NY.

I was a close colleague of Sharon's at work for almost 25 years. It was an honor to know her, and I am deeply honored to be able to speak about her today.

In the last three days, I've received many emails about Sharon, from her students, former residents, and colleagues, many of whom are here today. Each of you remembers Sharon in your own way. I'll do my best to honor each of your memories.

She had a remarkable career.

During her senior year of medical school, she worked at a medical clinic in a refugee camp in Thailand. This was an early indicator of her strong sense of social justice, which played out later in her decision to care for patients, not of affluence, but patients of poverty and disadvantage, in the Bronx.

She became a kidney specialist, a nephrologist, and joined the nephrology division of Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Montefiore Medical Center in 1988, at about the same time that I joined the same division.

Our mutual close colleague, Detlef Schlondorff, wrote to me a few days ago: "She was a real New Yorker, straight forward, to the point, no nonsense, honest..."

Indeed. I remember first meeting Sharon, in the Moses 2 conference room. We were conversing, and I must have said something a little aggressive, and she pushed back. I pushed back at her, and she pushed back at me. After a couple more rounds of this, she held up her hand and said "Vic, try to be nice. You need friends." Sage advice which, to this day, I tell to others, and to myself.

She quickly established herself as an outstanding physician, teacher, and scientist. In her research, she worked closely with Joel Neugarten on the question of why men with kidney disease more often progress to the point of needing dialysis or transplantation, compared to women.

In a series of important laboratory experiments, Sharon and Joel showed that a woman's estrogen protects the kidney's filtering unit from damage. Their scientific studies are required reading for all nephrologists.

In part because these studies made her an expert on gender, and in part because she was a natural leader, Sharon became president of a national organization called Women in Nephrology, which advances the careers of women in the field. The current president of the organization, who is at the Mayo Clinic, wrote to me: "Sharon was a wonderful,

strong person, and a dear friend and mentor to me, as well as to a large army of women."

About a decade ago, Sharon took on the job of directing our large and complex Internal Medicine training program. She and I spent many early mornings together, giving back-to-back presentations to those medical students who were applying to our program. Sharon would first warm up the crowd with some light banter and jokes about how the black suit worn for interview days will grow tiresome, and how the applicants' parents must be nervous because their children are interviewing in "the Bronx". It was good standup comedy. Then I would give a rather dry slide show, which she sat through, morning after morning. We used to say we could give each other's talks from memory, which was true.

Over the course of her eight years in this position, Sharon's program trained nearly 700 residents. Despite the large size of the program, Sharon made each resident feel special. She was the ultimate good and loving parent. Doctors in training get exhausted, they make mistakes, they lose their way, they sometimes act out. Sharon listened, gave sound advice, and offered a shoulder to cry on. Occasionally - because she had to - she admonished, or even placed a resident on probation. But always, there was a warm hug or a pat on the back.

She set very high standards for patient care with her trainees. Vafa Tabatabaie, who was a resident under Sharon, wrote to me that her most vivid memory of Sharon is the speech she would give to the new interns on orientation day. Vafa remembered Sharon's speech this way:

"You admitted an IV drug user with endocarditis, you begged the PICC line nurse for two days because you couldn't find a single tiny vein, you fought with the ID fellow to get antibiotic approval, and you finally managed to discharge the patient after 23 days in the hospital; now the patient is readmitted to you after one week outside the hospital, with his second episode of endocarditis, because he injected heroin with the same dirty needle. You feel so frustrated that you want to scream and run out and resign and become a pole dancer. But always remember, it's not about you. It's about him. You will leave the hospital tomorrow, but these patients won't."

Three years ago, Sharon moved over to the medical school and became the director of Internal Medicine education for all 3rd and 4th year Einstein medical students.

She brought her same strong parenting skills to this task. Medical students applying for internships have to write a

"personal statement." Sharon would edit these with each student, making sure the statements told a good story and were interesting enough to stand out. But she also made sure they weren't so interesting as to seem weird, which would jeopardize the student's chances.

She counseled the students as to which internships would be a good fit, adjusting her advice to their individual strengths and weaknesses. She told them how she had initially started out in Neurology, but had changed to Internal Medicine, so if they were confused or uncertain about their career choice, they should remember that nothing is irreversible, and it will all work out fine. This past spring, under Sharon's guidance, more Einstein graduates got into more prestigious internships than at any time in memory.

Asked some months ago to be the keynote speaker at an important Einstein student event, she realized she might not be well enough to attend in person. So in typical Sharon style, she re-conceptualized the presentation and, instead of delivering a stand-up speech, she had the College of Medicine make a video, which included both patients talking about what they want in a doctor, and Sharon's residents talking about the rewards of becoming a doctor. It was novel, and it was incredibly moving, even without knowing of Sharon's condition. But of course, Sharon was there in the video also, urging on the students, in her role both as professor and patient.

In another display of resourcefulness, she once intended to send a negative email about a boss to a colleague but, by accident, sent it to the boss himself. Most of us would panic after we realized we'd hit the "send" button. Not Sharon. She simply enlisted the boss's secretary, whom she had befriended, to go in and delete the offending email from the boss's "in" box. No problem.

A child of two holocaust survivors, Sharon was impressively tough in the face of adversity, and she seemed to get only tougher as the going got harder. At our residency graduation ceremonies each spring, Sharon would present various awards to the graduates. One of these, the Barry Mishkin Award, is for humanism, and is named after a wonderful resident who died during his training with us. Sharon had known and loved Barry, and year after year, when she presented this particular award, she choked up.

But, at graduation in the spring of 2010, she didn't choke up. This was the first graduation she attended after her diagnosis, her pelvic and hip surgery, rehab, and other therapies. She was composed and dry-eyed. After she sat down next to me, I leaned over and said "Sharon, you've toughened up." In typical Sharon style, all she said was "Yup."

A former resident wrote to me that she had run into Sharon in the hospital hallway at some point after Sharon had been through her surgery and was using a cane. Yet, the whole conversation was about the resident's marital problems. Sharon said nothing of her own travails and, in fact, simply

ended the conversation with "Isn't life interesting?"

A faculty member wrote that she had met Sharon using her cane, and had inquired if she had a leg injury. Sharon simply said, "It's a long story."

She came in to work as long as she physically could, meeting with students, organizing dinner parties for departing faculty members, moving forward our plans for a new dialysis center.

When she became too ill to come into the office, we would meet in her apartment where, among the other items on her work agenda, she pushed me - to be honest before I was ready - pushed me to find a successor for her at Einstein, so that her students wouldn't be short-changed.

And always, she talked about Jonah. For all her career accomplishments, *Jonah* was the center of her universe. She talked about how much she loved him, and how she had done her utmost to make sure he would be all right.

She talked about her husband Alan, her partner and true friend. She saw his inner strengths, and knew that he'll be all right, too.

She spoke with love and gratitude of her mother and her sister, with whom she had shared so much, and who cared for her so lovingly, through to the end.

We're approaching the Jewish New Year. A short story by the Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz tells of a Hasidic rabbi in a Russian shtetl who disappears every year during the Days of Awe. His Hasidic followers claim that, during those days, the rabbi ascends to heaven to plead with God on their behalf. A skeptic in the village sets out to disprove this belief, and at the next Rosh Hashanah, hides himself under the rabbi's bed to spy on him. The skeptic finds that, in fact, the rabbi disguises himself as a Russian peasant, goes into the woods, chops down a tree with an axe, takes the bundle of wood to the broken-down shack of a sick, old woman, pretends to be Vasil, a peasant, and makes a fire in the oven. And as he puts each stick of wood into the oven, he recites a part of the day's penitential prayers.

After witnessing this anonymous act of charity, the skeptic becomes a disciple of the rabbi, and thereafter, whenever he hears a Hasid mention that "during the Ten Days of Penitence the rabbi of Nemirov goes up to heaven", the skeptic adds quietly, "if not higher."

Many will say that Sharon Silbiger has ascended into heaven. I would only add: "if not higher."

Corresponding Author: Victor L. Schuster, MD (victor.schuster@einstein.yu.edu). Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Jack and Pearl Resnick Campus, 1300 Morris Park Avenue, Belfer Building, Room 1008, Bronx, NY 10461.

Editor's Note: Adapter from the 2012 Memorial Eulogy for Dr. Silbiger delivered by Dr. Schuster.