

Editorial

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Marguerite Lederberg, M.D., Emeritus Attending Psychiatrist, Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSK) and Emeritus Professor of Clinical Psychiatry, Department of Psychiatry, Weil Cornell Medical College died on Sunday, February 16, 2020. We celebrate the life of a remarkable woman who we all knew simply as “Marguerite.” Over her 30 plus year career at MSK, she dedicated her life to addressing the emotional needs of people with cancer. Marguerite was a pioneer in the fields of Psycho-oncology and Supportive Care. She helped found the first Psycho-oncology Program in any Cancer Center in the USA and helped create a worldwide movement to improve the psychosocial care of cancer patient. Working side by side with a colleague and dear friend Jimmie C. Holland, she helped found the International Psycho-oncology Society (IPOS).

Marguerite was born in Paris, France, in 1937, to Polish Jewish emigres. Her father was a physician who moved his family to southwestern France to flee Nazi occupation. Marguerite spent the war years as a hidden child in a Catholic orphanage passing as a gentile. Her father did not survive the war, but Marguerite and her widowed mother found safe-haven in New York City where they arrived in 1946. Marguerite was determined to be a physician and make her father proud. She was one of only two women in the Yale Medical School class of 1961. Moving to Palo Alto in 1962, Marguerite trained as a Pediatrician and Psychiatrist at Stanford University and was on faculty through 1978. It was there that she made life-long friendships with Irvin Yalom, Jack Barchas, and David Spiegel. It was also at Stanford that Marguerite married Joshua Lederberg, the Nobel Laureate (for Physiology or Medicine 1958), who would move the family to New York City in 1978 to become President of the Rockefeller University (located across the street from the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center).

Jimmie Holland had just become the inaugural Chief of the Psychiatry Service at MSKCC in 1977, and Marguerite soon joined Dr Holland and Dr Mary Jane Massie (Attending Psychiatrist at MSKCC and Chair Emeritus of the MSKCC Graduate Medical Education Committee) to help launch what would become perhaps the most influential Psycho-oncology program in the world. Marguerite was a compassionate and skillful clinician, a brilliant teacher and writer, and an innovator in adult and pediatric psycho-oncology, group psychotherapy, family therapy, and medical ethics in the oncology setting. Marguerite helped train over 200 clinical fellows in psycho-oncology in her 34-year career at MSKCC, influencing three generations of psycho-oncologists.

I had the privilege of being supervised by Marguerite in group, family, and couple’s psychotherapy during my clinical fellowship at MSKCC in 1984–1986. However, my mentor-mentee relationship with Marguerite did not end with my fellowship. I was blessed by her wise counsel and gentle corrective guidance over a 30-year period until her retirement in 2013. In those early formative years of the field of Psycho-oncology, Jimmie Holland was the inspirational force, striving unwaveringly toward a vision and a mission. It was Marguerite though, who was the one who was the nurturer, and the survivor who made sure that those of us who were driven to fulfill that same mission survived the process intact. Marguerite and I had a common legacy that created a very special bond throughout my career; we shared the legacy of being Holocaust survivors — she herself a “child survivor” and me a “child of survivors.” This drew us close and protective of each other. Marguerite was my “guardian angel.” She watched out for me and supported me in all my endeavors and throughout all the phases of my career as I took on one more daunting leadership position after another. She understood the pressures; She understood my human vulnerabilities; She understood who I was as a “Child of Survivors” and as the “Timekeeper’s Son.” With Marguerite Lederberg’s death, the world has lost another in a generation of “Witnesses to the Holocaust” who were here to exhort us to “Never Forget.” Marguerite was also an important “Witness” to the birth, development and blossoming of the field of Psycho-oncology globally. On a personal level, I’ve lost a benevolent and caring witness to my life’s work.

Marguerite Lederberg was rightfully recognized and honored during her career. She was a founding member of IPOS and of the American Psychosocial Oncology Society. Her many honors include the Chevalier de l'Order des Arts et Lettres, the Society of Liaison Psychiatry Lifetime Achievement Award, the Noemi

Fisman Award for Lifetime Clinical Excellence from IPOS, and more. The fields of Psycho-oncology and Supportive Care have lost a pioneer. All of us who were her students, colleagues, and those of us who learned so much from her prolific writings will never forget her. Our gratitude is eternal.