

In Memoriam

Remembering Ellen Gee

January 29, 1950 – November 3, 2002



Mary Catherine Bateson, the daughter of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, says in her 1990 book, *Composing a Life*, "...the portion of life histories that interest me the most are the echoes from one life to another" (p. 16). The life of Ellen Gee reverberated with the lives of others: those she loved, those she taught and mentored, those with whom she worked, and those lives she researched with such care, respect and gratitude.

Ellen was my friend, my close friend, as well as a much valued sociology colleague and sometime collaborator. Her very sudden passing on in November 2002 has left those of us who knew her with a deep hole in our lives, an absence that echoes with how very much she meant to us, and inspired us, and what she contributed to our knowledge and understanding of other lives, lives lived much longer than her own. It seems cruelly ironic that Ellen studied aging and the lives of aging women, yet the opportunity -- she always saw aging as an opportunity -- to grow old was denied her. She told me and her many close friends and colleagues that she never intended to retire. And, she never did.

Ellen had, at the time we last met, in Montreal in October, been eagerly looking forward to spending the Christmas holidays with her family at a resort in Cuba, where they had vacationed before. Her sense of life balance was finely honed. She worked hard, too hard at times, but treasured time to relax with her much loved family, husband Gordon, daughter Adrienne and her mother, Margaret. Her last e-mail message to me was significantly entitled, "Inner Spirit." It was about the lives of dogs who she thought had developed relaxation into a high art! Her irreverent sense of humour shone. She adored her canine companion "Sades" who took her on walks in parks she said she never knew existed until Sades came into her life. Clearly, Sades' capacity to relax was an inspiration to Ellen, as perhaps it should be to more of us.

Born and raised in Vancouver, "lotus land" was Ellen's habitat. Her extensive network of family, friends and colleagues was the springboard for her scholarly work, her bridge-building to the community and to policy, and her deep compassion for people and the world. With the exception of a short stint in the 1970s spent at the University of Victoria, her career and life were in Vancouver. That there are wonderful restaurants and were Grizzlies games in Vancouver added texture to her multi-layered life! She loved nothing more than sharing good food with family, good friends or colleagues. Her addiction to sushi was legendary. And she cheered silly for the Grizzlies!

Ellen Gee was a well known scholar, a longtime (since 1994) Chair of the Department of Sociology

and Anthropology at Simon Fraser University, and a tireless contributor to journals in various editorial roles, most recently as Managing Editor of *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, and as Social Sciences Editor of *The Canadian Journal on Aging*. In the month prior to her death, she proudly told me that she had been invited to serve on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. She had been excited about that prospect, and deeply honoured to have been invited.

With such a prolific record of accomplishment, citing the highlights of her contributions is challenging. Her co-edited 2000 book, with Gloria Gutman, *The Overselling of Population Aging: Apocalyptic Demography, Intergenerational Challenges and Social Policy* (Oxford) certainly sparked interest in gerontology, demography and social policy circles both in Canada and abroad. The key argument of this book, which developed out of the 1998 John K. Friesen Conference organised by the Gerontology Research Centre at SFU, is that population aging is an indication of social success rather than a cause for panic. She, together with Gloria Gutman, were invited to Tokyo to speak on this research perspective at a forum on Population Aging in July 2002. Ellen and I had plans to combine and build on our individual chapters in the *Overselling...* book, developing a joint paper that would disentangle economic from demographic aging. I am now carrying through on that work alone, and will dedicate it to Ellen.

Very recently, she contributed four chapters to *Aging in Contemporary Canada*, by Neena Chappell, Ellen Gee, Lynn McDonald and Michael Stones (Prentice Hall, 2003), a book she did not live to see in print. When this book was in press, she was ecstatic to learn that a major Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Initiative on the New Economy grant of which she was to be part, "Workforce Aging in the New Economy: A Comparative Study of Information Technology Employment," had been funded, to the tune of \$2.9 million. The Principal Investigator is Julie McMullin, University of Western Ontario. I serve on the international advisory board for the project. Ellen told me how invigorating it had been to go to London to brainstorm on the development of this project at the full application stage. She was very eager to get into the research itself and mentioned to me the day after we all heard that the project was funded, that she already felt behind in the work!

Research very dear to her heart was the series of studies on intergenerational living, carried out in collaboration with Barbara Mitchell and also with Andrew Wister. I always sensed that this line of research was of personal importance to Ellen because of her own close intergenerational relationships, both with her daughter, Adrienne and with her parents. Although I never knew her father, who passed away only two years ago, I had seen her with both her mother and her daughter on numerous occasions, and always admired the deep sense of friendship, respect, good humour and genuine joy that characterised the relationships. On many more than one occasion, I told Ellen how very lucky she was in this. Her wise reply was, "I know." She knew, in part, because she was a keen observer of relationships and of people, the quintessential sociologist. But, she knew too because of her research findings on intergenerational living which revealed the enormous diversity, complexity and challenge of intergenerational relationships. A new paper from this work is coming out in 2003: Gee, E.M. and B.A. Mitchell, "Exploring multi-generational families in Canada," in M. Lynn (Ed.), *Voices: Essays on Canadian Families* (2nd edition), Toronto: Nelson.

Still another important line of scholarly enquiry for Ellen was on various dimensions of multi-

culturalism, particularly as these intersect with aging or with well being. At the time of her death, she was working on SSHRCC funded study of the intersections between elderly immigrant women's health and policy, with her colleague, Parin Dossa. She had in 2002 completed another SSHRCC-funded study on victimization of aboriginals, with Ray Corrado. And she was working on a study of culture and co-residence, with Barbara Mitchell and Andrew Wister. She was also part of a \$1.7 million MCRI grant on the changing distribution of well-being in Canada with an ethnicity focus, with Jon Kesselman and others.

It is not surprising that Ellen was honoured by her colleagues in Canadian Sociology and Anthropology in 2001 in Quebec City, with the Outstanding Contribution Award. As President-Elect of the CSAA at that time, I had the honour and privilege of presenting her with the Award. Her mother and daughter were there. There is a photo of us beaming with joy and pride. I had never seen Ellen look more beautiful.

Ellen found time, remarkably, to Chair her Department for the past nine years, which may be a record for a Sociology Chair in Canada! She served SFU as Associate Dean, Faculty of Arts, 1988-92, and as Acting Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies in 1992. She was a charter member of the Gerontology Steering Committee at SFU, and remained on that committee since 1982, serving as its Chair from 1988.

It may be that Ellen Gee was cloned before cloning became well known, for it seems that one person could not have done so much. But there's more. Ellen was truly a friend and a mentor to many. One of her colleagues, Jane Pulkingham wrote to me the day following Ellen's death, "Ellen's warmth, compassion, integrity, commitment, 'salt of the earth' sense of humour, irreverence and seemingly endless capacity to 'be there' and make time, made her a dear friend and colleague." A former Ph.D. student, Karen Kobayashi, writes, "She provided each one of us with the right set of 'tools' to succeed not only in our chosen fields, but more importantly, in life. She gave us a strong foundation on which to build scholarship, while at the same time, teaching us to be good citizens of the world."

Ellen Gee's untimely death at age 52 is a deep loss to Canadian sociology and gerontology. To those of us who knew her well, we were privileged indeed to have our life histories echo with hers, and whether colleague or student, to have our lives and work enhanced soundlessly by her presence. "When you are playing tennis and the wind is blowing from your back, you may not be aware of the wind at all and think only that you are playing very well... It isn't until you change courts and the wind is blowing against you that you appreciate the force of the wind" (Rose, 1984: 268)*. Well, we've changed courts and now know the strength of your good breezes, Ellen. Thank you.

*Rose, Phyllis. 1984. *Parallel Lives*. New York: Vintage Books.

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