A Tribute to Sharron Smith Humenick: 1937–2006

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to honor Dr. Sharron S. Humenick, a long-time advocate of normal childbirth and Lamaze International, for her many accomplishments, her vigorous commitment to promoting the benefits of normal birth, and her passionate and diligent efforts in encouraging ongoing, evidence-based research that underscores the importance of a satisfying, normal-birth experience for women and their families. Dr. Humenick was a trailblazer in life and also became an exceptional guide in demonstrating how to cope with a terminal illness and dying. Through her numerous colleagues and friends in the United States and other countries, Dr. Humenick's legacy will live on in worldwide efforts to improve the childbirth experience for women and their families.

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Sharron S. Humenick,
Editor of *The Journal of
Perinatal Education*,
1996–2006

On September 9, 2006, Sharron Humenick—the editor of *The Journal of Perinatal Education* (JPE) and a longtime advocate of normal childbirth and Lamaze International—died from complications due to carcinosarcoma of the uterus. Sharron's professional accomplishments were many and valued highly by her peers. Her passion for childbirth was endless, and the changes she fought for have resulted in better birth experiences for many women. Sharron was also an internationally known expert on breastfeeding. Most Lamaze International childbirth educators know Sharron because she was the editor of JPE for 10 years and, before that, the contributing editor of a research column in the journal. However, few people know about her valiant and courageous fight against a virulent type of uterine

cancer during the last year of her life. She completed her final editorial for JPE just a few days before she died (see Humenick, 2006). Sharron's last act as editor of JPE demonstrates not only her vigorous commitment to promoting the benefits of normal birth but also her passionate and diligent efforts in encouraging ongoing, evidence-based research that underscores the importance of a satisfying, normal-birth experience for women and their families.

SHARRON'S JOURNEY WITH CANCER

After receiving her initial diagnosis of uterine cancer in 2003, Sharron had surgery, received radiation and chemotherapy treatments, and was cancer-free for almost 3 years. During that time, she became an expert on the anticarcinogenic effects of specific supplements and foods. When the cancer reoccurred in early 2006, the prognosis was grim. Sharron's physician predicted she had only 3–6 months to

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live. Despite such a dire forecast, Sharron was a trail-blazer in life and became an exceptional guide in demonstrating how to cope with a terminal illness and dying. Indeed—to use a familiar term in the study of spirituality—Sharron was a “Way Show-er” during the final months of her life.

Searching for Treatment

Sharron left no stone unturned in her search for treatment. Her medical treatment options were mutilating surgery, which had not been shown to improve survival time, and experimental drugs with deadly side effects. She chose not to do either treatment option. Instead, she used an alternative-health approach with supplements and other types of treatment. The *quality* of life was more important to Sharron than the *length* of life. She traveled to Germany for experimental cancer-vaccine injections and for hyperthermia and ozone treatments. Because she had nothing to lose, Sharron claimed that not having any medical options that would increase her survival time actually made her decision for the experimental cancer vaccine and alternative treatment easier. Throughout her search for treatment, friends accompanied her on her journey. Did these approaches work? That is difficult to evaluate. Would she choose the same approach again? Sharron’s answer was a resounding, “Yes!”

Receiving Support From Family and Friends

One of Sharron’s friends noted, “It’s really rare, today, for one to have as many good friends as Sharron had, and I think that speaks volumes about her essence.” Sharron was always an “electronic junkie,” and that characteristic served her well during the last months of her life. Wherever she was—Germany, New York, Virginia, or Colorado—she stayed connected to her friends via either her computer or her BlackBerry. As soon as the acute phase of her illness passed after each hospitalization, she used her computer to send e-mails from her hospital bed and look up information on specific treatments.

While preparing to move from Virginia to Colorado to be close to her daughter and grandchildren, Sharron sorted out personal items to give to others. When friends came to visit, she asked them to choose what they would like to have. In my case, Sharron picked out a beautiful, carved, small wooden chest that she had bought in Egypt and wanted me to have. Today, it has a special place in my home.

When Sharron returned home after her last hospital stay, she worked with her daughter to set up an

online calendar on the Internet where friends who wanted to visit could sign up for a specific time. This effort provided some order and an element of comfort during a difficult time. Throughout her last weeks, Sharron kept the home-health-care people who stayed with her busy organizing pictures for her grandchildren and family as she gave directions from her big lounge chair.

Allowing, Acceptance, and Peace

A few days before she died, Sharron realized she would not win her battle against cancer. The last time I talked with her, she acknowledged she was “going to die” and, in her typical, straightforward way, remarked, “Hospice is moving in, and I am moving out”—as if she were merely going to the grocery store. However, her statement represented the calm before the storm. Sharron was angry because she felt she had no choice but to “give up,” which clearly was not in keeping with her nature. I suggested that reframing the phrase “give up” to “allowing” whatever was happening was perhaps another approach that she could consider. Gradually, she became comfortable with that idea, and our conversation ended on a note of peace.

From the windows near her bed, Sharron watched the full moon shining on the Rocky Mountains during the last two nights of her life. She eventually lapsed into a coma and died peacefully, surrounded by her family and a good friend, Donna Ewy Edwards. Incredibly, Sharron died just a few minutes before Roberta Scaer, at the Lamaze International 2006 Annual Conference in Boston, accepted an award on Sharron’s behalf in honor of her vision, leadership, dedication, and work as editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Perinatal Education*. Sharron was indeed present in “spirit” at the conference!

SHARRON’S GIFTS TO OTHERS

The words of Sharron’s friends and colleagues best describe her influence in their lives and illustrate Sharron’s memorable contributions to Lamaze International, childbirth education, and the field of nursing:

Sharron was a wonderful person, a consummate professional, a person of great wisdom and intelligence, and a caring mentor.

From the windows near her bed, Sharron watched the full moon shining on the Rocky Mountains during the last two nights of her life.

Download a copy of Sharron Humenick’s final editorial for The Journal of Perinatal Education (JPE), titled “The Life-Changing Significance of Normal Birth” [The Journal of Perinatal Education, 15(4), 1–3], at the JPE’s site on IngentaConnect (www.ingentaconnect.com/content/lamaze/jpe). Lamaze International members can access online JPE articles free of charge at the IngentaConnect site by signing in at the “Members Only” link on Lamaze International’s Web site (www.lamaze.org).

A “Way Show-er” is a pathfinder—one who lights a path, shows others the way by his or her actions, and uses his or her creative abilities to bring light and understanding to the incomprehensible.

In February 2006, James Parrish, Director of Development in the School of Nursing at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia, interviewed Sharron Humenick who, at the time, was a faculty member and former chair of the school’s Maternal-Child Health Department. Parrish’s interview is featured in the Fall 2006 issue of Connections (VCU School of Nursing’s alumni magazine) and offers a poignant glimpse of Sharron’s personal views on her life, career, and cancer diagnosis. For more information or to download the interview article (titled “A Life with Purpose—1937–2006”), log on to <http://www.nursing.vcu.edu/alumni.shtml>

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In honor of Sharron Humenick's commitment to advancing normal birth around the world, Lamaze International established the "Sharron S. Humenick International Development Fund." Contributions may be sent to Lamaze International, 2025 M Street NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20036. For more information, call Lamaze International toll-free at (800) 368-4404.

I will never forget the unconditional support, friendship, and education she gave me for so many years through Lamaze.

Sharron's personal interest and dedication changed my career path and my life.

She gave so much to the profession and to the women she worked with. I owe her a great deal, from way back, as a new mother.

One of the biggest and most significant gifts Sharron gave me was her wisdom on how to mentor someone—first, as she mentored me and then, later, as I mentored others.

SHARRON'S LEGACY

Those of us who journeyed through life with Sharron are thankful for the opportunity and the experiences we shared with her. Individuals in the childbirth and breastfeeding communities who did not know Sharron will likely be touched in some manner by her wide-ranging influence in

these areas. Through her numerous colleagues and friends in the United States and other countries, Sharron's legacy will live on in worldwide efforts to improve the childbirth experience for women and their families. Sharron's spirit will always be with us, but it is the nearness of it and her many roles as a direct influence—the advocate, the leader, the scholar, and the friend—that will be missed the most.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A sincere thank you to all of Sharron's friends who shared their comments about her influence and professional contributions.

REFERENCE

Humenick, S. S. (2006). In this issue—The life-changing significance of normal birth. *Journal of Perinatal Education*, 15(4), 1–3.

FRANCINE NICHOLS is a past-president of Lamaze International (1988–1991) and the founding editor of The Journal of Perinatal Education. She is the co-author, along with Sharron Humenick, of the textbook *Childbirth Education: Practice, Research and Theory* (second edition; W.B. Saunders Company, 2000), and a professor at Georgetown University in Washington, DC.

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