

In Memory of Barbra Morris (1935-2007)

[Barbra was a Senior Lecturer in the Residential College and the Sweetland Writing Center. She taught courses on Television Text Analysis, and was especially interested in sports. She retired from the active faculty in December 2006 and died after a long battle with cancer in April 2007.]

Offered by Cindy Sowers at a Memorial for Barbra at the Residential College.

Barbra Morris understood and savored both sports and the arts, a rare combination in my experience. The walls of her home were hung with paintings and drawings. She was proud of the fact that these works were original, and that she personally knew the artists; they were friends and family; each work had its familiar maker and its story.

When she began her treatment for cancer, these friends and many others participated in food rotation visits – efficiently organized by Charlotte Pagni. I took part in the rotation, as many of you did. This was an opportunity for me to go to Whole Foods and pick out a delicious feast at the hot bar. I warmed things up in Barbra’s microwave, and one time I must confess, I set the microwave on fire. The cardboard carton ignited, flames shot out, and I had to beat them down with a dish towel. I hoped that Barbra, seated in her sunroom right next to the kitchen, didn’t notice; and when I emerged with our dinner, I tried to wear a perfectly normal face. Barbra too looked graciously normal, head turned slightly to one side, – did I see a giggle in her eyes and lips – politely suppressed? I think I did.

It was a treat for me when Terri, Barbra’s most steadfast companion, came over. Terri would arrange our Whole Foods meal elegantly on each plate: polenta with mushrooms fanned out around Tuscan vegetables, culminating in a sunburst of mac and cheese. Those were peaceful afternoons in some ways; we chatted about this and that; and Barbra bravely ate her dinner, even though most of the time she didn’t really feel like it.

Barbra was brave; but she always told the truth. It was a matter of respecting herself, and respecting her friends. She spoke in plain language, in the straightforward, upfront manner that shaped the style of her life – “true” in the way that architects and builders use the term. So she told the truth about the catastrophe of her situation. And she went bravely forward, into the long autumn afternoon.

We watched football games on TV; I needed Barbra’s analysis of the plays – punctuated by the dim roars vibrating from the other houses in the neighborhood. We also watched horse races. Barbra had seen many, so her enjoyment was tempered with the unflustered insight of a seasoned observer: there have been millions of races, all with excitements, all with wins by a nose or less, all with the tangle in the middle trying to sort itself out; all with the last horse – there always seems to be one alone – galloping fiercely while sliding behind, one length, now two, now four. From an aesthetic point of view, you could see the last horse as every bit as radiant as the first, isolated and dramatic; but Barbra understood the hard truth of the world given to us in every sporting event, and she didn’t flinch. So in the late afternoon, after washing up and goodbyes, she walked across her living room alone, dressed in her preppy turtleneck and neat sweats, and climbed the long, turning stairs: brave spirit; strong soul; true friend.