OBITUARIES

Helen E. Bagdoyan, 1935–1994

It was a cold February morning in 1977 when I first met Helen Bagdoyan, but we immediately had warm feelings toward her. She had come to the Dahlgren Library to interview for the position of head of public services and so impressed us that we closed the search, and she started working at the Georgetown University Medical Center two months later, on April 1, 1977.

During the interview, I learned that we not only had a great deal in common but that we shared mutual friends and professional acquaintances. We were both University of California at Los Angeles alumni from the Graduate School of Library and Information Science; enjoyed living numerous years in sunny Southern California; sewed our own clothes; and “played around in the kitchen,” trying outlandish gourmet recipes. As far as sewing and gourmet cooking were concerned, Helen was definitely the more talented. I soon abandoned those pursuits, but Helen always continued to balance her professional life with tinkering in the domestic arts.

Helen and I also worked at the University of Southern California (USC) School of Medicine Library. We were not there during the same years, but we knew many of the senior library staff. Our dearest friends were the director, Nelson Gilman; the associate director, Loraine Schutte; and Head Reference Librarian Ruth Monahan. Helen always stayed in contact with the younger USC staff, so she introduced me to the newer librarians who followed my tenure, such as Bill Clintworth and Sherrilynne Fuller.

At the Dahlgren Library, Helen will be most remembered for her perseverance, productivity, ingenuity, high standards, and superior knowledge of health sciences librarianship. She was a teacher to students and faculty needing instruction on how to access information. She conducted searches on all the health, biological, and chemical sciences databases; handled statistical research; conducted cost studies on computers; participated in conferences; wrote scholarly articles; and helped develop our famous Georgetown University Library Information System (LIS).

Helen and I traveled all over the country to other university and hospital libraries in the 1980s to conduct demonstrations of LIS and the miniMEDLINE system, because Georgetown was the first institution to provide a self-service search and retrieval system of a subset of the MEDLINE database.

Needless to say, Helen was continually promoted during her seventeen years at the library. She moved from head of reference services to assistant librarian of public information services, followed by several senior librarian positions, and finally became my “right arm” associate librarian. I was delighted when Helen agreed to serve as senior associate editor of the Bulletin of the Medical Library Association. She served the association well by religiously screening and improving manuscripts.

Helen contributed greatly to the health sciences library literature and made numerous presentations at professional meetings, especially at the annual meetings of the Medical Library Association. Her presentations always had a humorous quality that audiences responded to laughingly. She always made me chuckle when she would show a slide of the Georgetown graduating class a hundred years ago, compare it to the current class, and then point out the 600% increase of knowledge we were trying to “stuff” into the same head size that had not undergone an evolutionary change to compensate for the growth of the medical literature cited in Index Medicus.

I will always remember and admire Helen’s courage during her illness. She was an exemplary model. She was tolerant and optimistic, always willing to follow her doctor’s advice as he sought different modalities of treatment. She exhibited great strength in fighting the disease that eventually took her life, and she never gave up hope. I know this, because she planned to return to work and constantly talked about the projects she was going to undertake. Despite her weakened condition, she did not lose her spontaneous wit and joked continually about life at Georgetown and Washington politics.

What more can I say about a talented colleague that we all miss? Let me speak for the entire library staff when I say that we hold Helen in high esteem. We all recognize Helen’s superior-quality work, effective management ability, outstanding teaching capabilities, knack for developing staff to work independently, and self-discipline in pursuit of excellence. She was a drill master who was extremely loyal, dedicated, and professional. We are indebted to Helen for all we learned from her and will remember and miss having her around to constantly raise our standards of library service and to tell us a good joke. Helen constantly reminded me that life is for the living. After I lost my husband Art, she encouraged me to venture out, enjoy the best of every day, and seize moments of pleasure as they come. For all of these things, we treasure and love Helen Bagdoyan.

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Helen and I met twenty years ago when I came to Southern California to start my career as a health sciences librarian at the USC Norris Medical Library. Helen had joined the staff at Norris a year earlier after making a midcareer change. Previously, she had spent fourteen years as a research technician at the National Institutes of Health, USC, and Mount Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. Despite our differences in age and backgrounds, Helen and I immediately "clicked" with one another. In addition to our shared enthusiasm for our new careers, we found another common bond that continued throughout our many years of friendship: laughter. Helen loved to laugh. Because our senses of humor were so well matched, it was not unusual for us to bring each other to tears during one of our visits or telephone conversations.

Although Helen left Norris in 1977, three years after we met, to take a position as head of reference at Georgetown’s Dahlgren Memorial Library, we continued to meet for dinner at annual Medical Library Association meetings whenever possible and kept up with each other by telephone over the years. We last saw each other for dinner in Chicago two years ago—just a day before she learned of her cancer. We had a particularly good visit with one another that night and, without realizing it, had stayed past closing, with only empty tables and an anxious staff left behind. I will always have a fond memory of the wonderful time we had that evening and, once again, the laughter that we shared during our visit that night.

Like all of us, Helen had her idiosyncrasies. I recall one visit to Washington, D.C., several years ago, when she toured me around town in her BMW, a car she very much loved. After a few minutes in the car I quickly realized her patience for drivers in Washington was certainly no greater than her patience for drivers in Los Angeles.

My recollections of Helen also include her love for the piano as well as her reluctance to play for others. During dinners at her home, she introduced me to “Dubonnet on the rocks” and also her recipe for an incredibly delicious oil and vinegar bleu cheese dressing that has never since been equalled by me.

Many of her friends, as well as her sister, Leila, know how proud Helen was of her mother. She often spoke of how active her mother had remained in her later years, taking in concerts, lectures, and exhibits at the many museums available in Washington. Although I was saddened when Helen moved back to the east coast, I knew how important it was for her to be closer to her family.

Like many others, I miss Helen. But I am grateful she was a part of my life, and, because of my memories of her, she will continue to be part of it.

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Norris Medical Library  
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Remarks delivered at memorial service, Ignatius Loyola Chapel,  
Georgetown University School of Medicine, February 9, 1995

It is an honor to have been asked to deliver these remarks. By age and station, I have attended enough ceremonies where remarks are expected, to know that if any are memorable, it is because they were brief or to the point. I intend to do both.

Some may not realize that I had many links with Helen. Unaware of each other, we were both raised in upper-northwest Washington, just blocks apart. We were reared with like values in family and church. Both of us lost a parent early. After taking a respite from D.C. for higher education and early training, we returned to Washington, eventually to meet and collaborate here at Georgetown about twenty years ago.

Helen brought to her work the same values she learned at home, the same virtues she practiced as a young professional, and the zeal characteristic of one who genuinely enjoys what she is doing. She shared with many of us the vision that computers, libraries, and medical education were somehow linked in an exciting way, a way that demanded hard work. She believed to the very end that she would one day return to work.

It is a clinical maxim that an unknown lump or bump on a nice person is always cancer. It seems to happen only to good people. Helen was better than good. Unfortunately, no amount of value, virtue, or zeal can persevere against metastatic cancer, and she succumbed. Helen left us with an example and a challenge, and she is missed.

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