Tribute to Jinny

I remember meeting Jinny in 1976 as I walked to what is now called the Holland Bloorview Kids’ Rehabilitation Centre on my way to a Blissymbol workshop. Jinny had the title Symbol Officer and was in charge of maintaining and developing the symbol system for the Blissymbol Communication Service as it was known in its early days. Little did I know on that day that our professional association and friendship would span nearly forty years. I had learned of these amazing graphic symbols while in graduate school in Montreal and had volunteered and later taught in a classroom at a school for students with physical disabilities where there was a new program for students who faced significant challenges communicating.

When Duncan and I moved to Toronto in 1983, I was hired by the Blissymbol organization to replace Jinny who was retiring from her position but was willing to carry on in a volunteer consultant capacity. She had worked with a team to produce the first Blissymbol dictionary and helped to establish the International Panel to further develop the symbol system. As we got to know each other better, we found we shared some fundamental experiences. We were both born in Michigan and had lived in Chicago before emigrating to Canada and becoming Canadian citizens.

I wasn’t entirely convinced that I was the right person for this job, but I was willing to give it a try and was most grateful to Jinny who worked selflessly to support me in the position until 1991 when I returned to teaching. We both felt privileged to work with the Panel of professionals consisting of parents, symbol users, linguists, teachers, therapists and even a couple of medical doctors from countries in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, India, New Zealand and Australia. Jinny was particularly fond of the Scandinavians and formed significant friendships with several of them. At times the job was daunting, and Jinny was a person I like to remember as a “compassionate perfectionist” always directing me to produce the best possible outcomes for the users of Blissymbols and the integrity of the symbol system itself. The work carries on in Scandinavia today where the Panel members there are able to garner the necessary funds and support to keep it going.
Jinny and Dick both served as supporters and mentors to me in that position but more importantly became dear friends. We often worked at their house on Bannatyne Drive and had many interesting discussions on current events whenever we took a break from the work that often took intense concentration. Jinny and I shared memorable trips to symbol development conferences in Europe including Holland where to Jinny’s amazement I decorated our shared hotel room with more than 100 tulips I had bought when she was off viewing the spring flowers at the magnificent Keukenhof, Brussels where we had the members of the Panel lined up at a local highly recommended chocolate shop to sample their exquisite treats and even Israel in 1989. I remember for that one that Dick stayed home from Annisquam that August to be near the phone in case we were caught up in any international mayhem. I feel I benefited immensely from Jinny’s wisdom which included the sage advice to return frequently to the USA to visit family and friends so that I could rest assured that the country is not as crazy as we sometimes think it is, up here north of the 49th parallel. Jinny was highly intelligent, conscientious, diligent and extremely modest - always preferring to stay in the background when praise was handed out. But rest assured that there are many who served on the International Panel who will remember her contribution and dedication. Mutual friend and Panel member Keila Waksvik from Australia said:

She had a long and fruitful life and touched many people. Her work influenced many lives. She is remembered by a lot of people in many places of the world. What more could one ask? Thinking of her down here in Australia.

Final kudos to Jinny for struggling to master those new-fangled computers that came on the scene in our early years of collaboration and which we’ve come to depend upon so much today. I will miss her more than I can say and offer my sincere condolences to her family and friends.

Claudia Wood