

**Lifetime Achievement Award
Presented to Sandra Bertman, by Jennifer Sax**

Tonight, I have the immense privilege of presenting the first Lifetime Achievement Award that Good Shepherd has ever given.

Presenting this award to Sandra is both personally and professionally rewarding for me. I first met Sandra more than 10 years ago. I was early on in my career, had been with Good Shepherd for going on 4 years and we were sponsoring some of our first lectures in a grant funded series of educational programming. Some of you – may remember these first “lectures”. Good Shepherd’s offices were still located in the old fire station on Beacon Street back then – and we would hold these programs by lining up a handful of metal folding chairs around an LCD projector on a coffee table - projected onto a wall in a small room that also served as our resource library. I remember that I was nervous to meet her. Now in my head, Sandra Bertman was a big deal in the field of death and dying – and to me, had a bit of a “Kubler-Ross” essence if you will. My mother – also a hospice nurse – had seen her present at conferences and amorously described her teaching technique of projecting images using multiple screens and projectors side by side. Sandra laughs at this now – “Ha – she tells me – I used to just throw images all over the floor!”

I could not have been more surprised when on the night of the program she arrived and was seemingly more nervous than me! Here was this woman who has lectured all over world - England, Japan, Australia, China and Africa ...and was nervous to present to our audience of 10 folding chairs!

But to know Sandra, you know, that for her, this work, and her passion for synthesizing the arts, literature, spiritual values and cultural beliefs is never routine – and it never gets old. Last month when I called Sandra to inform her that we wanted to present her with this award the first thing she said was “NO – really...why me?” quickly followed by...., “Can I used some slides?” And though you won’t see it, tonight...after almost 50 years of lecturing, 4 published books, multiple articles, commentaries and awards... Sandra still gets excited – and she still gets nervous.

What you may not know about Sandra is that she was originally a high school English teacher. In 1969, when she was 33, her 53-year old mother got liver and pancreatic cancer. Immediately after what was presumably an operation to remove the cancer, doctors pronounced to her father, “Nothing more can be done.” Her father and the doctors conspired not to tell her – and rather, told her that it was “only Hepatitis”. But Sandra’s mother knew. She died 3 months later.

The night before she died, with her mother the generation before her, and her daughter the generation after her by her side, she told Sandra, “Take care of Bubbie” – and told her mother, “Ma – whatever is left of your life, enjoy it with Mickey and the kids.” “Mumelcah!” she declared in Yiddish. “Even the biggest tree falls.”

Sandra was angry. What sense had it made to tell her mother everything was fine? It seemed to her an act of deliberate cruelty to wait until she was weaker to face the reality of a diagnosis that she so clearly suspected. And why was it that the medical professionals at the hospital – the quote – unquote “professionals” were acting like they were the only ones who know anything about suffering?

An English teacher, she was reminded of books like Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, the poetry of Emily Dickinson, plays, songs and other forms of literature and art - all which speak to us about illness, grief and dying. It was at this time, that Sandra began what would become a lifetime career of teaching about how to work with dying and bereaved people. Within a year of her mother’s death, Sandra taught her first course at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education.

Sandra went on to become a leading Thanatologist known for using the arts and humanities to promote death education for medical personnel and the general public. Combining arts, literature, spiritual values, and cultural beliefs, her expertise is cultivating the therapeutic imaginations of clinicians through illustrated lecture-presentations and workshops. For most of her career, Sandra was Professor of Humanities in Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and Graduate School of Nursing, where she founded and directed the Program of Medical Humanities and Arts in Healthcare.

She laughs when she thinks back on her start at UMass Medical School – “Here I was teaching the Drs. and I didn’t even have any credentials!” But she knew that since the cadaver is the first patient a medical student ever cares for that if they could have compassion and empathy for that patient, it would have huge implications for their long-term practice. This work would ultimately lead to her book “One Breath Apart: Facing Dissection” which was published in 2009.

She was subsequently affiliated with the Graduate School of Social Work at Boston College as Research Professor in Palliative Care, and the National Center for Death Education as Distinguished Professor of Thanatology and Arts. Sandra held adjunct appointments at Dartmouth Medical School, Nova Southeastern University and visiting lectureships

throughout the States and abroad. As Sandra will tell you that – “it doesn’t matter what language you speak, you see, it’s a universal language the arts.”

Her [publication](#) and media credits include the classic handbooks [Facing Death Images, Insights and Interventions](#), [Grief and the Healing Arts: Creativity as Therapy](#), the film “Dying,” the United Press International award winning radio show “Sing a Song of Dying,” and a number of DVDs and manuals from some of her most well-known work [Art, Spirit and Soul](#) and [Reflections on Wholeness](#).

Sandra was named “Outstanding Death Educator” by both the Association of Death Education and Counseling and the National Center for Death Education and honored by the University of Massachusetts, at large, for Distinguished Professional and Public Service. She was the recipient of the first Humanities award by the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, and inducted into honorary membership to Sigma Theta Tau, the International Graduate Nursing Honor Society. She was the 2013 recipient of both the Janice Palmer Award, from the Global Alliance for Arts & Health & the Herman Feifel Award from the International Workgroup on Death, Dying & Bereavement for her lifetime achievement & leadership in both fields.

Sandra was the 2015 honoree for her pioneering work by the Association for Behavioral Science and Medical Education, and is the 2018 recipient of the Robert F. Kennedy Social Justice award from the National Association for HIV Over Fifty.

And her teaching continues. Currently, as Educational Consultant for Good Shepherd Community Care, Sandra tailor makes seminars for healthcare professionals and lectures at conferences all over the United States. How do you say thank you for a lifetime of such incredibly meaningful work?

When I asked her recently, what strikes her as most significant about her work she told me. “The best compliment I ever got was when a medical student told me after one of my lectures, “I’m going to call my grandfather tonight and tell him how much I love him.” She told me that to this day, every time she sees her slides and works with a new group she sees them differently. “I’m not linear, you see”and I just found that there were always other ways of knowing.”

It is my distinct privilege to present my colleague and friend, Dr. Sandra Bertman with Good Shepherd Community Care’s first Lifetime Achievement Award.