

IN MEMORIAM

Remembering Elnora M. Rhodes

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Dr. Yee is the 2011 Elnora Rhodes Award recipient.

Many years ago when I was in Washington, DC, as a young child, I saw the White House, the president, and leaders from all across the nation. It was an impressive collective of brainpower and intelligence all gathered together in one place. I was quite awestruck, and that was just the first of many SGIM meetings that I would attend. Admittedly, I did not see the president of the United States (and maybe I wasn't that young either), but I did see the president of SGIM, and the SGIM attendees were a remarkable group. I remember very well the first time that I met Elnora Rhodes at an SGIM meeting. I was standing around looking lost, when a vision in purple came over, gave me a big hug, and said, "Welcome, Ellen. It's so nice to see you here." That vision was Elnora, then the executive director of SGIM. Elnora had a way of making you feel that you were home, that she was always glad to see you, and that you were a valued member of the SGIM family. I used to call her the heart and soul of SGIM, and when she passed away in March 2001, it left a big hole in my heart. She had touched so many lives, and it was a tremendous loss.

In 2011, I was very deeply honored, humbled, and touched to have received the Elnora Rhodes Service Award. Elnora was the first recipient of this award, established in 1997, to honor her remarkable contributions during her ten years of service as SGIM's executive director. As I reflect on this woman who had such a positive influence on SGIM, me, and numerous other members, I realize that there are now many folks in the Society who did not have the chance to meet her. So this article is written in tribute to Elnora, with the hopes

that those who were fortunate to have known her will remember her with warmth and affection and that those who never met her will learn a little about the woman who led our Society to become a vibrant meaningful organization.

The following information is excerpted from a series of articles in the *SGIM Forum*. James Byrd, MD, noted that Elnora came from a close-knit family of three boys and three girls. "When she graduated from high school, Elnora faced a dilemma whether to pursue a career in music or get a degree in business. She had scholarship offers from The New England Conservatory of Music (piano) and Green Mountain College (business) in Vermont. She took her banker father's advice and chose an education that would, 'always pay the rent' with the knowledge that her love of music would persist and grow as an avocation." (Byrd J. *SGIM Forum* 1997; 20(11):4.) In his tribute, Stephan Fihn, MD, wrote that Elnora was a very private person with many remarkable accomplishments and that she graduated from Green Mountain College in Vermont where she was awarded the Gold Key for leadership and scholarship. She enlisted in the Peace Corps for five years, first in Lima, Peru, and then Lagos, Nigeria. In Lagos, her responsibilities included overseeing 800 volunteers stationed there; she also coordinated an evacuation of 350 Peace Corp officers during a civil war in Biafra. She then went to work for the Professional Standards Review Organization (PRSO) in Washington, DC, and worked for the American College of Physicians prior to being recruited as the administrator for the Society for Research and Education in Primary Care Internal Medicine (SCRECPIM),

which would later be renamed SGIM. During her 10 years with SGIM, she built the Society from one that was \$100,000 in debt to one that was solvent and had reserves for the future. During this time, "no member of the society was ever too unimportant to receive her personal attention." (Fihn S. *SGIM Forum* 2001; 24(5):1.)

Kurt Kroenke, MD, noted that Elnora "took an infant organization and nurtured it through childhood and adolescence...[she] infused SGIM with a sense of joy and celebration. Elnora was the consummate 'SGIM-er.' The organization meant the world to her, and its mission and members were not simply her job but her calling." (Kroenke K. *SGIM Forum* 2001; 24(5):5.)

William Tierney, MD, who was the SGIM president when Elnora received her award, observed that she gave us "direction, purpose, and stability at a time when we were small, on shaky financial ground, and with no strategic plan." (Tierney W. *SGIM Forum* 1997; 20(7):2.) Even after enduring cancer and chemotherapy, Elnora "never gave up hope, never stopped being graceful and considerate of others." (Tierney W. *SGIM Forum* 2001; 24(5):15.)

Tom Inui, MD, noted that Elnora was so dedicated to SGIM that she put our organization and members first before herself and postponed seeking medical care for her health issues until the annual meeting she was working on concluded.

The Elnora Rhodes award has been given to individuals in recognition for "outstanding service to SGIM and its mission of promoting patient care, research, and education in general internal medicine." I am so grateful to have been named the re-

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recipient of this award and to follow in the footsteps of previous awardees, including Elnora Rhodes, 1997; Annie Lea Shuster, 1998; Oliver T. Fein, 1999; Shirley Meehan, 2000; Mark Linzer, 2001; Carole Warde, 2002; Jack Pierce, 2003; David Calkins, 2004; Robert Wigton, 2005; Stephan Fihn, 2006; Eric Bass, 2007; Jeffrey Jackson, 2008; James Byrd, 2009; and Laura Sessums, 2010. Congratulations to Valerie Stone, the 2012 recipient. I feel very fortunate to have had a number of opportunities to provide service to this organization. There used to be a workshop offered at the SGIM meetings about learning to say "no." Unfortunately, I never took that workshop (though I heard it was very useful). I always felt flattered when asked to do something for SGIM and was delighted to say "yes." SGIM is my academic home, and it brings back the joy in medicine. Sometimes I think that SGIM should stand for "So Good to be In Medicine." When I was introduced as the 2011 Elnora Rhodes Award recipient, it was noted that I had chaired the Annual Meeting Program Committee not once but twice. Actually, I only chaired it once in 2010, but I was co-chair with Jeff Jackson, MD, in 2002, and if he had told me

how hard he worked as chair, I might have run away from Nancy Rigotti, MD, when she approached me in Miami to see if I would consider chairing the 2010 meeting in Minneapolis! But I am very grateful to Nancy and Jeff for giving me those opportunities to work with them and learn from their incredible leadership. There is still a lot of work I have to do to live up to the honor of this award. My heartfelt thanks goes to the award selection committee; the Women's Health Task Force; Anu Paranjape, MD, who wrote the nominating letter (among Anu's many talents is that she is clearly a master of creative writing and fiction); Sarajane Garten and the SGIM staff; and to everyone who has put up with me and worked with me in SGIM. You have my deepest admiration and appreciation for all you do, and if I have not mentioned your name individually, it is in my thoughts and heart and expressions of gratitude.

In her farewell, Elnora wrote the following: "After 10 years of giving my heart and soul to the Society of General Internal Medicine, I'm moving on to other opportunities. It has been an honor to work with the creative, energetic, and brilliant individuals of our Society. We've come a long way, and

I've been privileged to have played a role in our many accomplishments. We've balanced the budget (I now qualify to be president of the United States), received grants and contracts from private and federal agencies, expanded the annual meeting (our showcase), streamlined our administrative processes, and have become a mature and respected national medical organization. I got you started as an independent organization from the ACP; you're now on your own.... SGIM will always be near and dear to me. I wish you continued success. You are my family; you are my friends. Fare-thee-well!" (Rhodes E. SGIM Forum 1997; 20(3):2.)

It is hard to believe this wonderful woman has been gone for more than 11 years now. Yet I feel she will always be with us, cheering us on and encouraging us to go out and make a difference. I'll leave you with the final question that Elnora used to ask at the annual meetings: "Are we having fun yet?" And I hope your answer is "Yes, absolutely!"

Postscript: Please see the following SGIM *Forum* issues for articles and information about Elnora Rhodes: March 1997, July 1997, November 1997, May 2001.

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