

This statement was written on August 5, 2008, for the Columbia College Chicago Center for the Book & Paper Arts mailing list.

Marilyn Sward (1941 – 2008)

It is with heavy heart that I write to you to say that in the early hours of August 5, 2008, Marilyn Sward lost a two-year battle with cancer. She had just turned 67 years old on the 22nd of July. Many people know that Marilyn approached her final illness with the same kind of optimism and assertiveness that she brought to all things. When she first went into the hospital in late June, she was talking about going biking in Italy in a couple of weeks. But, for once, she was not able to make her idea happen.

More than almost anyone else I have ever known, Marilyn was completely remarkable in her ability to bring ideas into reality. Marilyn would look at a situation, see a problem, come up with a solution, and make that come to be. When her daughter Heather had trouble in the Evanston public schools, Marilyn thought that artmaking might improve her learning. So she helped to start an innovative and influential art program in the Evanston schools. Feeling that papermaking and paper arts needed a venue in Chicago, she started Paper Press. When the building where Paper Press was located burned to the ground, Marilyn moved it to another location. And in the late 1980s, when many of the non-profit art centers were starting to fold, Marilyn had the vision to merge her organization with Artists' Book Works, and form the Center for Book & Paper Arts at Columbia College. Marilyn was the Director of the Center in its formative years, but not content with the facilities at 218 S. Wabash, Marilyn managed to convince the powers that be to construct a state of the art facility (at a cost of close to \$1 million) in the historical Luddington Building at 1104 S. Wabash.

Marilyn was a wonderful teacher and colleague. Given her love for all things green (from flowers, plants and trees to frogs) and her affinity for things aquatic (Marilyn was an excellent swimmer) it was perhaps inevitable that she would work primarily with paper, that “hydrophilic medium,” as she once put it. She loved all things paper, and managed to share that love with decades of students at both Columbia College and the School of the Art Institute, and across the country in residency at places like Haystacks. I will spare you the list of her professional accomplishments: the boards she sat on, the publications she helped foster, etc. Instead, let me share some more personal recollections.

Marilyn was the ultimate “morning person.” She was typically up at or before dawn, would go out for a run or a bike-ride, and be at work on things by 7 a.m. I once had to tell her that if she kept calling me on the phone before 8 a.m. I would never speak to her again. On the other hand, by 9:00 or so in the evening, she would wilt, like flowers in a waterless vase. When she and I traveled together in Indonesia, you could count on her to be the first one up and about each day, but keeping her awake for an evening performance required caffeine, and even that didn't always help. How she managed to stay awake for all those performances at Lyric Opera over the years is anybody's guess.

When Marilyn was in my Sound class (she got her Master's Degree from Interdisciplinary Arts shortly after I started teaching in the program) I had students write pieces for each other to perform. She told her accomplice, "Just don't make me play the piano." So what did the other student do? Wrote a piano piece that Marilyn had to play. I don't think I ever saw her that angry again. But she played it. No challenge was to be left unmet, or unconquered.

It was also Marilyn who taught me never to travel without a journal, multiple writing implements (pens get lost), tape, and a small stapler. That way, everything of importance from the trip – ticket stubs, receipts, cards from restaurants where you ate, etc. – all end up in "the book." Helpful come tax time, and an invaluable document. Even now, when I tend to travel with my laptop, and keep my account of the day's activities directly into my computer, I still need the book. Marilyn also taught me that when traveling, you should buy something useful. Among her souvenirs of Bali were some brightly colored plastic buckets. I asked her why she wanted to lug these back to Chicago in her suitcase. "Because I'll use them everyday in my studio, and think of where they came from," she replied.

Marilyn was always remarkably clear-sighted, a force of rational decision-making, a wise advisor. During some recent "drama" at school, she called me on a Sunday morning (at 8:30, thankfully) and we had a long chat. Not only did she offer insights into the situation, but she actually listened to what I had to say. That's really what made her such an effective administrator: she didn't just talk, she listened. In fact, that's probably what made her such a wonderful artist and human being: she listened.

Jeff Abell