

In Memory of Ronny Zinner  
Vice Chair, Board of Overseers, Heller School for Social Policy and Management  
Brandeis University

by Lisa Lynch  
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When Mike (Zinner) asked me to speak today about Ronny's commitment to community service, I really struggled with how I could do justice to this extraordinary woman – my partner at Brandeis University in her roles as a longstanding trustee and vice chair of the board of overseers at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management, and my friend.

I first met Ronny seven years ago when she interviewed me for the position of Dean at the Heller School. It was clear from the start that she was very protective of the Heller School. She wanted to make sure that the new Dean was someone who would build on the accomplishments of prior Heller deans Stuart Altman and Jack Shonkoff. She asked tough questions about my vision for the school but I quickly realized that they came from her deep commitment to the school's mission – knowledge advancing social justice.

Early on I realized that Ronny had a different take on how to be a successful philanthropist. Instead of following the current trend of business philanthropy she had what I call a person centered approach to philanthropy. As much as Ronny appreciated the role of physical space in providing new possibilities for organizations to pursue their mission, she knew that any physical structure, no matter how beautiful, would ultimately be defined by the people inside it and what they did. Therefore in her role as President of the Carl and Ruth Shapiro Family Foundation and as a trustee at Brandeis University she made sure that she actively engaged with all those involved in the social issues and projects she funded. It was personal.

She did this in a variety of ways. As Jean Whitney, who served as the executive director of the Foundation, shared with me, one of the many projects she became involved in was a program that provided scholarships to promising low-income Boston high school youth who wanted to go to 4-year colleges. Ronny knew from academic research that it was critical to have mentors stay in touch with these students as they progressed through college. As a result Ronny emailed and called many of the Shapiro Family Scholars on a regular basis. She helped them solve problems, talked to them in person when they struggled with their grades and organized celebrations at the end of each academic year to reward their success. All of these scholarship students graduated from college on time and with minimal debt. Ronny's intimate involvement was critical to their success. It was personal.

Early on in my tenure as Dean I saw Ronny's personal touch when she participated in an evening event held in Heller's Zinner Forum. The Zinner Forum is a glorious atrium built as part of the 2006 Schneider building expansion of the Heller School. We call it our town square and it is the realization of the shared vision that Ronny, former Heller School Dean Jack Shonkoff, and former Heller board of overseers chair Tom Glynn had to create a place where scholarship, controversy and community would come together. The event was on the crisis of children aging out of care in

Massachusetts. With Ronny's active support we organized a great panel discussion with Heller researchers and members of a state task force who had produced a policy report on this issue. The highlight of the evening though was listening to the stories of young people who were aging out of foster care but who worked at the More than Words Bookstore and Café in Waltham. This café is a nonprofit social enterprise that empowers youth who are in foster care, court involved, homeless, or out of school to take charge of their lives by taking charge of a business. This was an enterprise that Ronny had supported financially. At the end of the formal program Ronny made a bee line for these young people, many of whom had been visibly quite nervous speaking in front of such a large audience. I saw her work her magic – asking them about their current circumstances and their dreams for the future. They instantly became relaxed and talkative. One young man would not let her leave until she promised to come and taste his caramel latte at the café - the best in Boston he promised. And she promised she would. She knew how to make someone feel special. She didn't do this in a flashy way – it was just personal.

Ronny supported many students at Heller and all speak about how her words of encouragement kept them going during their graduate studies. But one story stands out in my mind. We established a summer internship program and Ronny volunteered to take on an intern in the Foundation. That intern, Toni Burke, now the VP and Executive director of City Year, in San Jose, CA described her experience working with Ronny as follows: “Ronny was wonderful and always so positive. Her door was always open and in spite of everything she had to do she was so curious about me. She saw me as me – by this I mean she saw the potential in me and helped me believe I could do anything. I learned so much working at the Foundation. In particular I saw how she supported experiences that would change the trajectory of people's lives.”

Ronny never missed an opportunity to ask me how Toni was doing. Her support of Toni was more than that of an employer of a summer intern - it was personal.

Ronny's commitment to equal opportunity and social justice also extended to individuals with disabilities. Concerned about the many barriers that prevent these individuals from reaching their highest potential, she set about establishing a grant program developed around the concept of inclusion. Using her role as President of the Shapiro Family Foundation she invited scores of area nonprofits, government leaders, and our new director of the Lurie Institute for Disability Policy at Heller to a meeting to discuss expanding recreational opportunities for persons with disabilities. She wanted the group to develop proposals that could incorporate the diversity of challenges that faced a blind person, a person in an electric wheelchair, or a youth with Down syndrome. As our director of the Lurie Institute told me this week, “Ronny's dedication to improving the lives of individuals with disabilities was unmatched.” I told her it was personal.

Ronny has been described as a quiet presence and I would agree. But behind that quiet exterior Ronny liked to stir it up. One way she did this at Heller was by encouraging public discourse on difficult issues. This sounds easy until you realize it means speaking with and listening to people who may not agree with you. Ronny loved the school wide commitment to social justice but was concerned that if we just spent our time talking with people who shared our same values we would not be successful in advancing social change. So we established a series of debates in the Zinner Forum covering topics such as immigration policy and most recently Medicare and social security reform.

I am not sure that any of our speakers at these forums has ever changed their minds. But I have seen these debates foster student working groups and help our students and faculty get a more nuanced understanding of policy issues. In spite of addressing some of the most politically charged issues of the day, the debates were always conducted in a respectful and thoughtful way. That was the Ronny way.

This personal approach meant that anyone who was fortunate enough to spend time with Ronny quickly became good friends. You had to – it was personal! All of us here today were the beneficiaries of her high energy, big smile and positive outlook on life even in the darkest moments. It was contagious. There was no time for glumness around Ronny.

Ronny and I quickly realized that we shared many things in common – first and foremost our devotion to our families - in particular our children and in her case her grandchildren as well. The second thing we shared in common was our good fortune to have married men who were great cooks. In 2011, after Ronny finished her grueling treatments, my husband Fabio and I organized a celebratory dinner. Ronny and I went back and forth on what would be the most appetizing post chemo therapy dishes to have our “boys”, as we referred to our respective husbands, prepare for her -- risotto with Gorgonzola and arugula, or risotto with oranges and cream, or orrechiette with tuna, tomatoes and capers. Food was something we all enjoyed cooking and sharing – especially for Ronny if it was the grilled corn or steak at her favorite restaurant Toro. One of my many memories of Ronny is the fun we all had last May celebrating her birthday at Toro. A wonderful gathering with great food and drink that brought together all her friends from the many circles she traveled in, and most importantly, her family with the spotlight on her grandchildren.

In closing I want to share one more story about Ronny that her former Heller School intern Toni shared with us this week. This story captures Ronny’s most enduring quality - her caring of others. One day when Toni was working at the Foundation, Ronny was uncharacteristically distracted. Ronny shared with her that she was having some difficulty buying kayaks for her grandchildren. What stuck in Toni’s memory was the fact that Ronny said she was buying the kayaks for her grandchildren, not so that they would have a kayak, but rather to create memories for them to bond with their cousins.

Classic Ronny. She was always thinking about others and how she could create those personal bonds and memories that would stand the test of time. Now the onus is on us to sustain her values.

It’s personal.

May her memory be a blessing.