

Richard Goldstone

IN MEMORIAM  
MINA SHAUGHNESSY  
1924-1978<sup>1</sup>

*She gave to this profession a tough compassionate dedication . . . an insistence . . . that the task before us—the education of those who had been formerly discussed as not being worth educating—was simply our most important reason for being teachers.*

Leonard Kriegel

Professor Kriegel's statement about Mina Shaughnessy is profoundly meaningful. Since City College was first established in 1847, a shameful question has been recurrently raised and answered: Is it worthwhile providing a college education to the Poor, the Crippled, the Blind; the Irish, the Jews, the Italians; the Blacks, the Hispanics, the Asians? And for the past one hundred and thirty years, the City College answer has been a resounding and triumphant: Yes, it is worth it.

That question raised by the elitists, by the privileged, by the uninformed has been confronted by generations of dedicated teachers among whom there have been Great Teachers—those whose influence has radiated beyond the classroom, beyond City College, beyond New York, beyond the northeast region of the United States.

Mina Shaughnessy, whose death occurred on November 17th, was one of a bright galaxy who, like Morris Raphael Cohen, Harry Overstreet and Mark Zemansky, so intensified the aura of City College that it remains both a national phenomenon and an educational landmark.

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*When this was written, Richard Goldstone was faculty ombudsman and professor of English at City College.*

Her achievement in breaking through the outmoded idea relating to literacy and intelligence has been recorded in her book, *Errors and Expectations*. Only weeks before her death her contribution to educational thought was recognized by the presentation to her of a signed Presidential Proclamation tendered by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Benjamin DeMott, of Amherst, offered his tribute in *The Nation*.\* *The New York Times* published the results of her scholarship on its front page in 1978.

Mina Shaughnessy's death coming only days and weeks after the recognition of her contribution to the teaching of writing in today's colleges was the occasion for personal grief among those who knew her. At a memorial service held at City College on December 8th her friends gathered to hear tributes by a handful of her colleagues and students. Led by her husband, Donald, and President Marshak in the Faculty Room in Shepard Hall, 200 colleagues, students and friends heard six tributes articulated by CUNY Distinguished Professor Irving Howe '40, City College Professors Leonard Kriegel and Edward Quinn, famed poet Adrienne Rich, colleague Alice Trillin and former student Lottie Wilkins.

Excerpts from their remarks follow.\*\*

*Not that she was Pollyanna. Far from it. But she never lost that clear-eyed breadth of vision she must have had as a tall, awkward adolescent scanning the Dakota hills. (It's hard to imagine her as awkward, I know, but that is what she always claimed she had been as a girl.)*

*Wherever she got it, it enabled her to see what the rest of us missed. Never mind the obvious example—how she saw what none of us saw in those hills of blue books that collected around her desk. Those same blue books that the rest of us prayed to be delivered from or self-righteously cursed, she looked at with that western-horizon vision, seeing more in those strangled semi-sentences than we ever imagined could be there. (It should be no small consolation to know that there are now thousands of teachers—and thousands more to come—who will have the opportunity to share that*

\*Although Professor DeMott's tribute was published a few weeks after Mina Shaughnessy's death, it was delivered at a Rockefeller Foundation Conference before her Passing. *The Nation* commented editorially that "Professor Shaughnessy's work may be the most significant advance in years toward what DeMott calls: "the grand project of this society, democratic realization."

\*\*At the time of publication, only Ms. Rich's and Messrs. Howe's, Kriegel's and Quinn's remarks were available. The complete text of the memorial tributes subsequently will be published.

*vision by reading her book; not to mention the countless numbers of students who will benefit from those teachers.)*

**Edward Quinn**

Mina loved this city, with its elbowing fraternity, its misplaced passions, its range of styles that might reveal some bond of values. It amused her to treat her friends as quintessential New Yorkers, parochial apologists for the city's discomforts who would rise to hauteur in defense of its culture and its radicalism. She liked to take over a few words of our Yiddish, once telling me she had had a long shlep from Convent Avenue to 42nd Street. In an essay I later wrote, I brought her in anonymously as a cosmopolitan from South Dakota who did a lot of shlepping. She liked that and said, in turn, that she wanted me to visit her ranch back home. What for? To see me, she said, on a horse. What an imagination!

Mina had a puritanical streak, chastising herself for invisible deficiencies, but she had also a good healthy vanity, delighting in her achievements. Once I ran into her and seeing she was beautifully dressed, asked, with just a strain of mischief, whether she was off to a fancy ball. Not at all; she had just come from a remedial writing class. Didn't her students mind those fancy clothes? Why should they, she answered, they knew she dressed for them.

About no other person in the world would one believe that, yet all of her friends here would surely recognize it as a complete truth. Mina never condescended to students with pap about the "creative" benefits of illiteracy; nor patronized them with a rant about "maintaining standards." She knew her job was hard, and went about it. If she came to class in beautiful clothes, well, of course her students would enjoy it. They, unlike professors, knew something about style. And they knew she was their friend: strict, patient, undeluded, sustaining.

Whatever is good in this battered university, whatever we still have of the genuine and sincere, found its embodiment in her work. As long as she was there, battling for her people, one kept some faith. Her remarkable book is a masterpiece of its kind, a triumph of intelligence over lazy habits, of tact over mere method. All the rhetoric of cynicism which has made our culture so dismal these past 7 or 8 years, could be dissolved in a minute by the hard-headed purity of determination that rang in her voice.

There is a mystery here of human character, the force of true conviction, and how profoundly it can affect people as they recognize its presence. It is a kind of authority, without bluster or prophecy, ego or system. And as a result one wanted to please her, not just personally but ethically. Her mildest disappointment was a judgment to avoid; her mildest approbation, a pleasurable reward.

She did not want to die; no, she wanted desperately to live. She was at the peak of her gifts. She was vital and beautiful. She had work to do. She was loved, and human enough to enjoy being loved. The decades of which she was cheated—one wants to rail against the outrage of it. Some of us may find modes of reconciliation, and blessings to those who can; but for me, perhaps others, there is a need to express the feeling that the death of this splendid woman reveals an injustice at the very heart of things.

Yet even in rebellion against this unbearable waste, one wants also to fumble, not to reconciliation but to some terms of peace. The Hebrew prayer asks for “perfect rest for the ceased, in the exalted places among the holy and the pure, who shine as the brightness of the firmament.” Brightness—that is the word one wants here. The brightness of her, the memory that at least once in our lives there shone among us a figure of moral radiance.

**Irving Howe**

*She left an inestimable legacy of connections for her survivors. Her work illuminates the links between literacy and illiteracy, between student and teacher, writer and reader, grammar and literature, between the failures of our society and its visions. She is one of our major educational theorists, whose quality I believe will be recognized more and more as time goes on; I would place her with Maria Montessori, Paolo Freire, Ivan Illich, among the greatest of those who have understood that intelligence is not determined by privilege.*

**Adrienne Rich**

#### **Note**

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