Shelley Saunders, a distinguished physical anthropologist and well loved professor at McMaster University in Canada, finally succumbed in 2008 to the cancer that had haunted her through the last decade and a half of her life. She was no pushover for the disease, which struck first in the early 1990s, and was thought to have been cured, but which returned again, resulting in the loss of both of her kidneys in 2003. This necessitated daily haemodialysis that constrained her ability to travel, but had no material effect on her research output and her teaching until the cancer reappeared in her pancreas more than four years later. Her audacious battle was emblematic of the way she approached life. She resisted, uncomplaining, with great fortitude and with all of her might until the very end. Shelley did not need urging not to go gently into that good night, nor to rage, rage against the dying of the light. Nevertheless, she was taken in the early autumn of her life; there are few of whom it can so sincerely be said, she had so much more to give.

In many respects Shelley was a renaissance scholar in our field, as a glance at her bibliography will show. Her primary focus was on dental and skeletal biology and bioarchaeology and forensics, but her scope of interest was very broad. She also published on evolutionary theory, demography, isotopic and palaeodiet studies and was a pioneer in ancient DNA. Her honours are legion and her career is marked by a long series of “firsts”. She was the first biological anthropologist to be elected to the Royal Society of Canada, a signal honour. She was in the first tranche of Tier 1 Canada Research Chairs, a federal grant, tenable for seven years, awarded to outstanding researchers acknowledged by their peers as world leaders in their fields. Shelley initiated the Children and Childhood in Human Societies research network. She founded and established an ancient DNA laboratory at McMaster, now called the McMaster Ancient DNA Centre, and she created and later expanded the McMaster Anthropology Hard Tissue and Light Microscopy Laboratory to study growth and development. Although set up to investigate both bones and teeth, concentration in the last decade or more had been on teeth, with particular emphasis on odontochronological analysis in deciduous teeth. She was the recipient of many academic awards, but despite her elite stature in Canada she was an extraordinarily humble person—quiet, reserved, gentle, kind, and scrupulously fair—more likely to talk about the achievements of her many students than about her own.

Devotion to her students was one of Shelley’s hallmarks. She loved to teach and was indeed an educator of distinction, someone who relished training bright
Shelley was dedicated to getting undergraduates engrossed in learning and discovery. She invented innovative ways to achieve this, and was famous amongst students for her Bone Groan quizzes, for her dental Jeopardy games, her Bioanth Bingo and skeletal crossword puzzles. However, Shelley’s greatest enjoyment came from working with and developing her graduate students, and she took enormous pride in their accomplishments. Her skilled supervision and devoted mentorship earned her the President’s Award for Excellence in Graduate Supervision at McMaster and her former students now teach at universities across Canada, the United States and Europe. One of her last acts demonstrates her commitment to students. At her behest, just days before her death, she and her family established the Shelley Saunders Graduate Scholarship with a generous donation of $500,000, which was supplemented by contributions from friends and well wishers of another $50,000. This fund will sponsor annually two graduate students who wish to pursue research in dental or skeletal biology at McMaster. The Canadian Association of Physical Anthropologists, of which she was an active member through her whole career, has also established a grant in her honour to provide supplemental research funding for graduate students.

Shelley grew up in Toronto and New Jersey and met Victor Koloshuk, her beloved husband of 37 years, while they were both undergraduates. She received her Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Toronto in 1977, defending her dissertation while pregnant with their first child, Robert. After the birth of their second child, Barbara, and after teaching anatomy at McGill and contract teaching at the University of Toronto, she was offered a tenure-track position in the Department of Anthropology at McMaster University in 1981. She went on to become the central pillar of McMaster’s program in physical anthropology and her numerous research projects over the years received international recognition. Among the most notable was a complex, multidisciplinary project that she directed on a large nineteenth-century cemetery from St. Thomas’ Anglican Church in Belleville, Ontario, which presented the rare opportunity to work with skeletal and dental material associated with individuals of known age-at-death. Shelley’s projects also took her to Europe, for instance to the University of Bordeaux where she was involved in the analysis of a medieval population from south-western France, or the Czech Republic where she conducted histological analysis of ancient Egyptian pharaonic samples. She developed a particularly rich collaboration with Italian colleagues from the Pigorini Museum in Rome on the Imperial Roman site of Isola Sacra. She was also familiar to the Canadian media through her work in forensic anthropology for the Hamilton Regional Forensic Pathology Unit and a number of local and Royal Canadian Mounted police forces, where some of her cases often received considerable attention. Shelley had a very prolific publication record, amongst which were six co-edited volumes, the latest, *Biological Anthropology of the Human Skeleton*, co-edited with Anne Katzenberg, was published in March of 2008. She served on the editorial board of the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* from 1994 to 2000 and was North American Editor of the *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology* until shortly before her death.

Shelley was a great teacher, a nonpareil researcher, an expert biological anthropologist, a wonderful colleague, an avid gardener and opera fan, and before dialysis curtailed it, someone who loved to travel. She possessed all of the qualities required for distinction in any field: keen intelligence, great tenacity, the capacity for hard work, terrific organising and planning skills, and an ability to extract the best from those around her. She will be remembered with deep affection by a host of current and former graduate students, friends, and colleagues. Her contributions to our field will also be sorely missed.
Shelley R. Saunders

Bibliography


Compiled by:
Charles FitzGerald
Department of Anthropology
McMaster University
Canada