In Memoriam: Donna Blacker

Suzanne Nielsen

**Note:** Donna Blacker, a longtime adviser at Metropolitan State University who also taught English composition classes, died Feb. 15 of kidney failure. She touched the lives of many in her 35 years here. Suzanne Nielsen, tutor coordinator in the Center for Academic Excellence, was a longtime friend and colleague. She shared these words at the funeral in Chicago.

Donna and I met more than two decades ago through Hamline University’s graduate program in liberal studies. As a poet and fiction writer, I was drawn to her vast reading history, far-reaching intelligence and her ability to compose lyrical memoir. We would talk endlessly about writing, although we quickly realized that we had much more in common than that of being writers. Some of those colloquies were focused on academia; others were focused on more personal issues such as our connection to life and the vice of depression.

Over the years Donna and I supported one another through good and not so good relationships, episodes of mania and depression and unending revisions of life in general, or to put it simply: the good the bad and the ugly. In 1997, I started working as a writing tutor at Metropolitan State University, where Donna worked for over 30 years as adviser extraordinaire. We formed a writer’s group with other Metro State friends and writers and met for several years once a month often at 59 Hilltop enjoying crab salad with black olives provided by Mom.

Donna would often say to me, “I love how clearly I know your characters through what they say.” Often times that’s the best part about inventing characters; you can have them say things you have always wanted to say but haven’t. I relished Donna’s comments because it sent me back to writing and talking to my characters to reach their level of honesty.

When Donna was stricken with kidney failure and found herself unable to work, the university suffered a huge loss. Students and staff along with faculty looked to Donna for answers to complex questions, and some of those questions had life-long consequences that Donna thought deeply about. Donna knew everyone throughout the university and everyone knew Donna not just by name, but by a well-earned reputation. Donna found the good in everyone. I bent her ear several times over the phone complaining about my newest and most frightful enemy and by the time we were done talking I was filled with compassion and a sense of feeling lucky that enemy was really my friend. Donna made me a better person in many ways.

During Donna’s last week of life, she kept repeating how tired she was, but in-between being tired she would reach out to comfort her mother or her sister. “Don’t cry,” she’d say and her penetrating stare followed you home. Because her body was giving out, Donna conserved what energy she had to let her family know just how important they were and always had been to her. Toward the end of her life, she knew she was dying and she mentioned how scared she was. I kept telling her it was a scary transition because we don’t really know what’s there on the other side, if anything. Donna and I talked at great lengths in her last two weeks about the possibility of life beyond this realm. We agreed that our energy most likely resonated in plants and the earth’s organic substances and so one could say that there is life beyond.

I will miss Donna forever. I will miss our hearty conversations. Donna taught me patience and understanding and the warmth of a smile. I will miss her deep dark eyes reading my unspoken thoughts. I will miss her gentle laughter and her endless ability to debate anything. Most of all, I will miss knowing that Donna is thinking of me as I always knew I was important to her. I never doubted her loyalty to me as a friend and a confidant. Every time my characters speak, I know on some level Donna is listening and prodding them on. I love you Donna.