

In Memoriam: Dr. Ouida Ramon-Moliner

Dr. Ouida Ramon- Moliner (nee d'Abreu)

Born in Waterford, Ireland in 1929,

died in North Hatley, Quebec, February 21, 2020.

Named after the English author Maria Louise Ramé (1839-1908) who used the pen name Ouida, our Ouida was one of five daughters of an Indian from Mangalore. He had a surgery in County Waterford, Ireland, in the 1920s, where he was known as the "Black doctor." Her mother, who lived until age 113, was listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the UK's oldest living woman. At an early age, inspired by Mary O'Connor, an anaesthetist who worked with her father, Ouida determined to be "just like her." Her other goal was to have four children. She succeeded in that and in so much more.

Following in the footsteps of her two sisters who also studied medicine at Trinity College Dublin, Ouida left Ireland in 1956 en route to New Zealand. While stopped in Montreal to pursue further postgraduate training, romance intervened when she met a Spanish-born neuroscientist who would become our father and Canada became home for the next seven decades.

Interactions with some of the great figures in the anesthesia and surgical professions punctuated her career. At the Montreal General she assisted Dr. Wilder Penfield, who developed awake craniotomies. These surgeries, which kept the patient awake to pinpoint the source of epilepsy, opened up a whole new understanding about how the brain works.

In a recent interview, Ouida recalled that to prepare to do an "awake craniotomy" she would build herself a little tent so that she and the patient were head to head. With a light, she would show the patient a stack of word-picture cards. As Dr. Penfield stimulated the brain to get reactions, she would show the patient an elephant, a cow, a rabbit, a horse. In a recent interview, she described the process: "I'd show the patients the cards and I'd say, "What's that?" And the patient would say "A horse", and I'd say, "Fine." And then Penfield would suction a little more brain and I'd say, "What's that"? And the patient would still say a horse. So, Penfield would go a little further and I'd say, "What's that?" This stimulation would continue until the patient would call the horse a rabbit. At this point I would tell Dr. Penfield to stop, as this meant he had stimulated a new part of the brain.

Her sound judgement was evident during a stint at the Georgetown University Hospital in Washington D.C. when she called in the department head as Jacquie Kennedy

arrived in labour, later giving birth to JFK Jr. There she also participated in early mechanical heart valve surgeries. Upon returning to Canada, three children in tow, she became the first woman anaesthetist in Quebec City and later helped to found the CHUS in Sherbrooke, a newly established medical school, where she worked until 1995. She took her Hippocratic oath very seriously: "Practice two things in your dealings with disease: either help or do not harm the patient."

Ouida loved her work. Her career as an anesthetist was remarkable not just because she was a woman---but because she was often the first woman amongst men. She took whatever work was assigned to her and, as a mother of four, she had no choice but to work fewer hours than her male counterparts: a 40 hour work week, a weekly on-call night and every other weekend. She always gave more than she took without resentment and without recognition for the most part. In 2012, she humbly received the 2012 Quebec Lieutenant Governor's Seniors Medal. She'd just get on with it because she was happy doing what she did. If her darker skin was ever an issue she did not say, joking that she was black Irish.

Somehow, she managed to raise four children along the way, all successful in their fields, often dragging them across the ocean to visit grandparents. She believed in enduring family ties and generated the idea that where you come from is important. To this day her seven grandchildren carry on her mantra: "Travel as far as possible, as often as possible, and come home."

A pioneer in environmentalism, she was president of the Massawippi Water Protection Society and volunteered well into her 80's. She served on the user committee of the local hospital and helped hordes of friends to navigate the medical system including, at 89, driving them to doctors' appointments. Their refrain was consistent: Ouida was efficient, thoughtful and helpful.

Her grandchildren witnessed her indomitable spirit during their many adventures with her: On New Year's Day 2008, she resuscitated a German tourist in southern India dragged ashore by local fishermen. The morning of her 85th birthday she zip-lined through the forests of Costa Rica and rode a horse after lunch. She literally took the cake on her last birthday, blowing out all 90 candles on a strawberry shortcake they baked. As she raised her hands in victory, surrounded by community inside the North Hatley Curling Club, one sensed that she knew she was leading an extraordinary life.

Early in 2020, she had an inkling that her time had come. Following a diagnosis of aggressive pancreatic

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cancer, Ouida chose to die naturally at home surrounded by family. On February 29th, over 200 people crammed into North Hatley's Universalist Unitarian church to remember how Ouida embraced life while getting things done with quiet determination.

Ouida opened the way. She didn't make a big deal about it. Those who knew her commented on her trademark shrug in response to any suggestions that, as a woman, she might have been treated unfairly at work. She just proved by example that she was just as good. Some say better. *Written by Ouida's children: Marie, Carmen, Michael and Peter.*

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