



## *Gail Ellen Weinstein: Her Life* 1955-2010

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Gail Weinstein—educator, linguist, mentor, world traveler, peacemaker, mother—died peacefully at home after surviving ovarian cancer for five productive and happy years. She was born on Long Island, New York, where she spent her childhood. Her mother claims Gail’s sense of adventure and competency was established when Gail was required to bike to her own orthodontist appointments as a preadolescent. As a teenager, Gail took part in a summer youth program that brought her to areas of the US where she saw poverty and the rich cultural diversity of this country. While attending Kirkland College, where she earned her BA in cultural anthropology, Gail traveled to Guatemala in 1976 with a group of students from the School for International Living; she arrived just days prior to a devastating earthquake which demolished the town where the students were housed, killing thousands of its residents. Gail elected to stay in the area to help with reconstruction, writing to her mother, “I can only heal myself by helping others.” This belief remained Gail’s lodestar for her whole life.

Gail’s first job was with the Quakers (Society of Friends) in Philadelphia, PA, where she moved in 1977; she directed the Right Sharing of World Resources program, which funded small grassroots projects in countries around the world. She went again to Guatemala to visit projects in that country until the political climate there made travel too dangerous.

Gail entered the doctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania in 1983, and her work centered on the Philadelphia Hmong community, refugees from the highlands of Laos and Cambodia who worked with US forces during the Vietnam War. Her interest was in both intergenerational literacy work and work with cultures that, like the Hmong, were not literate in their own language. She began her professional association with the Intergenerational Center at Temple University, where she was director of Project LEIF (Learning English through Intergenerational Friendship), which later became SHINE (Students Helping in the Naturalization of Elders) After a successful pilot year, LEIF was replicated in three cities across the country.

During her studies, Gail went to China as a visiting scholar, where she traveled on her own, taking her guitar because she felt music created a bridge between people, even in the absence of a common language. She also used this trip as an opportunity to go to Hmong refugee camps in Thailand, carrying with her gifts from Hmong individuals in Philadelphia to family members still in camps.

After earning her PhD. in Educational Linguistics in 1986, Gail continued teaching ESOL at Temple University; that same year, Gail married fellow linguistics student, Ziqiang

Shr, and their daughter Hannah Rebecca was born in 1990. In 1995 she and her family relocated to San Francisco, where she began work as an associate professor at San Francisco State University. They settled in the Parkmerced area, and from there, made several trips to China over the next few years; after the marriage dissolved, Hannah and Gail continued to live there, and Hannah grew up among the towering trees, nearby lake, and in the arms of her nurturing single mother.

Gail's work in literacy blossomed at SFSU, and, as a professor in the MA TESOL program at SF State, she taught courses on immigrant literacies, community-based curriculum development, sociolinguistics, and teaching listening/speaking and reading/writing skills. In 1990, while at Temple University, she had published a textbook, *Stories to Tell our Children*, for adult immigrants in cooperation with regional adult ESL education chairs throughout the country. *Stories* laid the groundwork for a teacher training module focused on the integration of learner-centered practice into ESL instruction. The technique, the epitome of community engagement, became the basis of a collaborative initiative led by Gail with adult schools, community based organizations, and community college programs in the U.S. and Canada and resulted in a textbook series *Collaborations*. The material and the process became the basis for training teachers in a curriculum development process now known as *Learners' Lives as Curriculum*. Her other scholarly publications include guest-edited volumes of *TESOL Quarterly* and *TESOL Journal*, *Learners' Lives as Curriculum*, and *Immigrant Learners and Their Families: Literacy to Connect the Generations*.

Soon after she arrived at SF State, the Lila Wallace Readers' Digest Fund provided Gail with a grant to establish the *Bay Area Immigrant Literacy Initiative*. These funds enabled her to work with 6 community-based organizations in the Bay Area, including Self-Help for the Elderly, the International Institute of Oakland, Career Resources Development Center, the English Action Center, Northern California Coalition for Immigrant Rights (Caring Hands), and the Alameda County Public Library, to develop learner-centered English as A Second Language (ESL) curricula.

During her time at SF State, Gail raised over \$1,000,000 in support of her work on behalf of immigrant and refugee communities and the educational programs that serve them. In 1998, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) granted \$80,000 to SF State in collaboration with City College of San Francisco, in partnership with Temple University, Philadelphia, to establish *Project SHINE* in the Bay Area.

In 2001, through a grant from the Knight Foundation to the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL), Gail was hired to train Cambodian immigrant and U.S. born staff and develop a training protocol for family literacy practitioners for continued use by NCFL. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education funded her work on the *First Amendment Project*, in which she worked collaboratively with ESL teachers from City College of San Francisco to collect immigrant narratives on the theme of "speaking truth to power" for ESL curriculum. Through 2004 continued funding created the opportunity to establish *SAIL, Students Assisting with Immigrant Literacies*, expanding SHINE beyond citizenship classes to basic ESL and literacy classes throughout the Bay Area. Over the

years, the base of coaches in this program grew from 15 per semester to more than 100. Support from the San Francisco Foundation helped to institutionalize SHINE into the fabric of SF State classes and to expand collaborations with family literacy programs in the Bay Area.

Even after news of her cancer diagnosis in 2005, Gail continued to work on the national and international stage. In 2006-2007, the Pennsylvania Bureau of Education provided \$35,000 to formalize procedures for training teachers and teacher trainers in using her model for “Learners’ Lives as Curriculum”. In collaboration with community partners, she guest edited a special issue of *TESOL Journal* to be published in 2011, on the power of stories and community building for language learning

In 2008, TESOL, Inc., the most widely recognized professional organization in ESL education, bestowed on Gail the James E. Alatis Award for Service to TESOL. This award acknowledges outstanding and extended service by TESOL members at international, regional and local levels. Gail provided over 30 years of service to TESOL, via several leadership positions, including Affiliate President, Interest Section Chair, and member of the Board of Directors. At the 2008 award ceremony, Mary Romney, former TESOL board member and friend, praised Gail for her “unwavering commitment to the membership, the leadership, and the mission of the association.... She is one of the most inspiring, resilient, and courageous people I have ever been honored to know.”

Also in 2008, Gail collaborated with colleagues to found CIRCLE, the Center for Immigrant and Refugee Community Literacy Education at SF State whose mission is to strengthen immigrant families and communities; to support practitioners who serve them, and to engage students deeply in the fabric of their communities with experiences that build their professional and leadership skills in personally transforming ways. Her vision helped establish a cross-disciplinary graduate-level Certificate in Immigrant Literacies which forges collaborations between TESOL and many departments on campus, including Health Education, Nursing, and Ethnic Studies.

Internationally, Gail gave workshops in Japan, China, Turkey, Israel, the West Bank, and Russia. An inspiring force in the Bay area Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue group, she traveled to Israel and into Palestinian territories in 1998 and 2007, working with teachers committed to developing dialogues between Israeli and Palestinian students. In October 2009, after seeking alternative medical treatment in Israel, she returned to the West Bank (Hebron) where she reunited with a group of language teachers to talk about using learner stories to promote conversations about peace. In November 2009, Gail completed a speaking and teaching tour, sponsored by the U. S. State Department, in four Russian cities (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kirov, Kaliningrad).

IN 2010, Gail was awarded SFSU’s Distinguished Faculty Award for Excellence in Service, for her’ extraordinary, meaningful and lasting contributions”, and the same year she also received the Bay Area Jefferson Awards for Public Service.

From the Bay Area to the West Bank, ESL teachers attest to the transformative power of Gail's work using learners' stories. Long-time colleague and adult ESL practitioner of the Oakland Unified School District, Sue Pon states that Gail "has inspired and empowered the TESOL community....[Her] work with the TESOL community regionally, statewide, nationally and internationally has created no less than a movement."

This past summer, Gail had the opportunity to bring her expertise to the health care arena when she was invited by the SF-based Charlotte Maxwell Complementary Clinic to organize cultural sensitivity workshops for clinic volunteers. With Gail's guidance, volunteers shared personal stories about working with low-income immigrant women with cancer who speak little or no English. These stories prompted the volunteers to reflect on the cultural dimensions of cancer and its treatment, and to identify positive practices that promote quality cancer care for all women. In addition, Gail received training as a massage therapist and provided massages herself to indigent women at the clinic.

A lifelong hiker and cyclist, Gail began volunteering several years ago with the Environmental Traveling Companions (ETC), taking special needs individuals and groups out on sea kayaking trips. Certified in CPR and First Aid, she accompanied participants to Angel Island and other ports of call in the Bay area, believing that every one, regardless of physical or financial limitations, should have the opportunity to experience the challenge and beauty of the wilderness. She was also an enthusiastic swing dancer, and relished every opportunity to do the Lindy Hop.

