Our friend and colleague, Nelva Bonucchi Richardson, passed away on March 11, 2011, after a valiant struggle with multiple myeloma. A long-time Association of Medical Illustrators (AMI) member, she has always displayed a great dedication to our profession, and in so doing, has raised the bar for those who have followed.

Her contributions to the body of medical knowledge are significant and well-regarded—both artistically and as a role model. It almost goes without saying that Nelva has always been universally-liked and respected by her loyal clients and by her colleagues in the AMI.

Nelva was born in Granville, IL, to Albert and Evelyn Bonucchi. She received her degree in medical illustration from the University of Illinois, Chicago in 1971, where she was a formidable, very competitive student. Nelva developed deep friendships in the Illinois program that blossomed throughout her life.

After graduation she went to work in Washington, DC at Georgetown University Medical Center, where she was surrounded by luminaries in the field: June Hurd, Peter Stone, and Biagio Melloni. It was during her 5-year stint as a medical illustrator at Georgetown that she met her future husband, Bevan, who was attending dental school. After they were married, they moved to Sacramento, CA, where Nelva courteously introduced herself to the local medical illustrators in the area, and established her own freelance business. She also took a turn as an adjunct lecturer at the UCSF program in medical illustration.

She became very active in the AMI—participating in presentations, serving on a number of committees and twice on the AMI Board of Governors. Bob Demarest remembered that rather than staying at home as a new mother, Nelva attended the Annual meeting with her infant son, Drew, and parents in tow—she just didn’t want to miss that meeting as a newly elected Board member! She was a natural choice to head the AMI Ethics Committee, and she handled her duties with equanimity and balance.

Nelva was inducted into the first group of AMI Fellows in 1988. She was a natural shoo-in because of her outstanding and selfless service to the AMI since the early 1970s, and her great medical illustration career with specialties in head and neck surgery, ophthalmology, medical device, and dental subjects. Her contributions were legion.

Influence and example

Nelva was a wonderful leader, not by force of character or driven by ego, but by her own good example as a conscientious, persevering and gracious person. She has always been encouraging and supportive to the young illustrators just entering the field, and the rewards for her were the satisfaction of sharing and watching her profession grow.

“I grew to know her well at the turn of the century, when I was tapped to coordinate the 2001 Annual AMI meeting at the Asilomar Conference Center in Pacific Grove, California,” Chris Gralapp remembers. “I was conference coordinator, and Nelva enthusiastically volunteered as Program Chair. Nelva organized a whopping 28 concurrent sessions, partly because she couldn’t say no to a good presentation proposal but also because she was so multidisciplinary in her approach to continuing education and broadly inclusive of the abundance of different kinds of educational inputs. That legendary meeting was a true trove of riches due in large part to Nelva and her easy interactions with the whole team.

We became fast friends, and she truly taught me some important lessons of life: of confidence, grace under pressure, eternal curiosity, and so much about an old-fashioned concept called Service—to our colleagues, to the medical profession, to the community. I will be eternally grateful for the lessons I learned from her.”

A full, active life

Nelva genuinely lived her life in full color. Her extracurricular interests included ballroom dancing, painting in watercolor and in oils, birding, hiking, fishing, literature, and book groups. Later on, she began delving into her own Italian heritage, and became a fluent speaker and tutor of Italian. One of her proudest achievements was attaining her Italian citizenship. Another interesting avenue for her prodigious talents was her portraits of California wineries, painted using red wine from each winery. These unique works can be viewed at paintingwithwine.com.

Nelva is survived by her husband, Bevan; her two children, Drew and Dana; and a vast extended family of relatives and friends in several states and in Italy. Her ready smile will be greatly missed by her many friends and colleagues in the AMI.