

Ms. Mary-Margaret Almonte
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To Better Understand

Who was Linda Schulman? This has been a pressing question on my heart since becoming the 2010/11 recipient of the innovation award that bears her name.

Recently, I had an opportunity to interview her friend and colleague over the phone line. I asked my ELL students' questions and mine during the interview, listened, and took notes voraciously. The interviewee was a very kind, gracious and articulate woman. Our conversation birthed this article, and gives a fuller understanding of this teacher was that funded our digital cameras for our ELL writing workshop.

The interview became a beautiful word picture of an educator that clearly devoted her time, energy, and creativity to an ELL student population, their families, and the teachers that were under her leadership as the Needham ELL Director. Linda Schulman retired young after a longstanding career with that district. It seemed right away, she came aboard the non-profit *Teachers21* organization to share her years of expertise to train teachers full-time.

As I listened to her colleague describe her with five adjectives that reveal Linda Schulman as a teacher, I felt as if I was meeting her for the first time face to face. This teacher was "enthusiastic and committed to the students she served. It sounded like she took that commitment to a whole other level, and at times, had children and their families in her home sharing their culture and traditions. Linda was fascinated with cultural connections. She was also extremely knowledgeable. This educator, after receiving her ELL degree at Boston University, stayed current and highly motivated in the field. Linda had an insatiable curiosity for learning and instilled that in students. Finally, Linda Schulman was a warm and loving teacher. Her students would without a doubt "felt supported" by her.

I shifted the conversation and asked "what was she like as a friend?" There was a momentary pause, and the word "loyal" was spoken. *Linda was a loyal friend.* She was invested and genuinely interested in people and their families. Linda had an artistic flair, and a passion for cooking that she readily shared with her friends. The final adjective to describe her as a friend was generous. *Linda Schulman was a generous person.* She gave not only her time, but also her talents away freely to bless others. This carried over into her career. Networking was a huge on-going part of Linda's life. She was a resource for so many. It was an estimated sixty schools in the state full of teachers that counted on her. Linda nurtured her teachers that were under her tutelage with great care and perseverance.

Truly, Linda "embraced the spirit of public service." As the interviewee and I talked candidly with one another it was becoming clear that Linda Schulman was a unique individual and addition to her public education and non-profit career time, she gave of her own time to those in need. Her heart was in helping the English Language Learners in this state. I was told that she could often be heard saying, "Education is the Equalizer." This *call* was "paramount to her. She was a vibrant woman that "went above

and beyond” her duties and responsibilities. “Anything a teacher needed was not too much for her.”

As the interview was closing, I asked the question my seventh grade ELL student wrote for me to ask the interviewee. My student wanted to know, “How did you feel when you were around her?” Without hesitation, the answer came: Joyful! “I felt joyful around Linda Schulman.” Her friend felt cared for by Linda.

“Linda was an optimist.” Linda Schulman stayed optimistic even when suddenly she became sick with cancer. She worked through her illness. She was diagnosed with lymphoma, and ten months later she died from the disease. Our conversation lingered for a moment at the depth of the loss, but the interviewee interjected that “Linda lived life!” Linda Schulman’s enthusiasm rings through the final words during the interview when I asked “In a sentence, what do you think would be a word of encouragement she would give to a struggling student if she were alive to give it?” Her friend knew exactly what Linda would say to that struggling student. “I know you can do it, and I’m never going to give up on you-even if you give up on yourself.”

*Author’s note: Thank you to Susan Freedman responding so promptly to my email when I inquired about interviewing you to learn more about Linda Schulman. I appreciated the time on the phone, and the clearer understanding of who Linda was as a director, teacher, and friend. It was so helpful and an honor to write this article to help us keep Linda’s memory fresh in our minds and hearts. I am truly inspired by her legacy of *encouragement*.