

**Melanie Nelkin**  
**September 29, 2016**  
**Reflections on My Friendship with Martina (MVP)**

I could say that if it weren't for the genocide in Darfur, Martina and I would have never met BUT also I believe that our friendship was b'shert, meant to be and that we would have found each other through another Jewish, social justice or human rights issue somehow, someway, regardless of our west coast east coast locations. I only knew her for 7 years, but it felt like we were friends for a lifetime.

I first laid eyes on the beautiful chisel faced blonde in Feb. 2009 at the inaugural Carl Wilkens Fellowship retreat in DC. We may have been the oldest girls in the room and she was the wisest. I was impressed by her voice of conviction, and keen intellect. The more I heard, the more I wanted to change my seat and have what she was having. She was determined to move the needle on genocide prevention in our time and prevent the most heinous crime from ever happening again. And, Martina was incredibly organized, well connected to the Sudanese diaspora and she understood the complexities of the politics and history behind the conflict. She was brilliant in her assessments of policy and creative about how to bring about change.

Our friendship grew through our respective activist communities.... and then, our Jewish radar kicked in and we became two Jewish "broads" as she would say, "with a mission". In Feb. 2012, I got a call from the President of

JCPA(Jewish Council for Public Affairs) asking me to co-chair the IHR (International Human Rights) portfolio. I asked him who the other co-chair would be and he said that someone named Martina Knee was his next call. I told him if Martina didn't say yes I wasn't doing it either. She said "yes" and hit the ground running while injecting a new sense of purpose into the organization and its membership.

Her dedication to causes was indefatigable. We pounded pavement together in NY at the UN, and other organizations, and in DC at the State Dept. and on Capitol Hill. **Once**, we realized we were wearing the same shoes. She was so proud of discovering her Jewish heritage and always seemed happily immersed in study and tradition, applying Jewish values to everything she organized and advocated for. My frustrations would often get the better of me, and I would say things like, "we're just Nailing Jell-O to the wall," but Martina, who was the queen of snarky, could turn bad news into humorous sarcasm on a dime.

She thought that having to get up at 5:45 for a CT scan was a human rights violation. When we were planning my visit in July last summer she told me that one didn't have to behave in SF because no one behaves here. We started sharing New Yorker Magazine's satirical column called "The Andy Borowitz Report" and since the political satire was fully aligned with Martina's humor, it often sounded like she was the author. She was in so much pain before going to Hospice. I remember that she was fearful of being moved

and leaving the hospital. She said, they don't want me stay here because if I die here, it would be bad for their numbers. She was right but she still had some of that snark left in her!

She sent me books:

1. Atul Gawande's Being Mortal, which we discussed at length
2. How to Raise a Jewish Dog+stuffed scissor-circumcision toy that said "moyel" on it for my dog's Bark Mitzvah
3. She sent me Yehuda Amichai's Book of Poetry for Valentine's Day this year. I had just returned from Israel a few weeks prior where I had done a Shabbat walking tour of Jerusalem with an Amichai scholar. So, it was b'shert that the book would arrive then and from Martina.

She forgave my youthful Yankee ways, and I started calling her my MVP...because she was a most valuable person. She may have been a SF Giants fan but she never realized that she was a Giant.

Looking back on the chronology of her health in the last 2 years she taught me lessons in gratitude and appreciation. No matter what pulled her down, she always, always asked how I was doing, my family, and my dogs! I felt like I'd won the lottery last July when in between chemo treatments she schlepped me around SF like a trained tour guide full of energy and life

Martina Knee was wise and had an infinite heart, the biggest spot reserved for Mike. She turned her words into deeds and signed her emails

“With gratitude and solidarity.” I loved her and feel blessed to have been her friend.

### **More Notes and thoughts about Martina:**

-Passover 2015 she was lauding the tastiness of gluten free matzo and the fact that it didn't end up in a million crumbs

-My email history with Martina spans from present back to 2009. When I go through the hundreds of emails what amazes me most is the amount of detailed information she is able to share so that many of us could more fully understand the multi-layered conflicts in Sudan. She was a champion of Sudan geography, always connecting the Sudanese diaspora to fellow advocates.

-On March 17, 2016, I received the most wonderful email from her filled with pictures of people jumping into the air on a beach and “I'm thrilled” spelled out along the bottom border. Signed “all my love, in solidarity” she was elated to have finished chemo and had also learned that she didn't need immunotherapy, an experiment she was very fearful of.

-The last email she sent was on August 9<sup>th</sup> the day she left for Zen Hospice. The email was about a sign on opportunity to the German FM asking him to help secure the release of Darfuris among other things. I hadn't had a chance to read the long detailed letter and waited till the deadline to sign it. When I finally did, I noticed that Martina had already signed on. In fact her name was at the very top of the list of signatories: “Martina Knee, co founder, Act for Sudan, San Francisco”.

### **Some quotes that remind me of Martina:**

Eleanor Roosevelt. Speech at the United Nations, 1958. "The Great Question."  
Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet, they are the world of the individual person: the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerned citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.

In Jonathan Saffron Foer's book *Everything is Illuminated*, he said that Jews have 6 senses: hearing, smell, taste, vision, touch and memory. For Jews, memory is not a tool but how we make sense of the world. We see the world not through our eyes but through our memories.

**Rabbi Tarfon says...It is not upon you to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it. (Hillel's translation)**

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter said that when he first started learning ethical teaching he became angry and bitterly disappointed with the world. After a while he was aggravated with himself and the world. After a long while he was only upset with himself.

Words are no longer enough. It is time for action. This is the first genocide of the 21st century. The world has said, 'Never again.' Those words must mean something.

~ Jim McGovern

## **A Poem By Cory Williams, Carl Wilkens Fellow in Martina's class of 2009**

We Remember Her-Cory Williams CWF 2009

When we need a champion for those who have none,  
We remember her.

When we have a joy we crave to share,  
Or when the Giants win the pennant,  
We remember her.

When we have achievements that are based on her encouragement and example,  
We remember her.

On Opening Day and the rebirth of spring,  
We remember her.

At the blueness of the skies and the warmth of the summer,  
At the crack of a bat with a Brandon Crawford triple,  
We remember her.

At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of autumn and a Game 7,  
We remember her.

At each rising of the sun and at its setting, we will remember her tireless work to end strife and  
conflict for those at home and around the world.

As long as we live, Martina too will live

For she is now a part of us,

As we remember her.