

Shona Kelly Wray Memorial
August 4th 2012
Berkeley City Club

From Randolph Langenbach

There are times when death visits us, and we grieve, but we understand. A father, a mother, an older relative or friend has passed. So too, when we read of accidental tragedies such as that of the renowned visiting professor from Israel who on his bicycle in Berkeley was run over by a passing vehicle on July 13th. Accidents happen – cutting short the lives of those who are young or in the prime of life. We regret them, but we can understand them.

This is not one of those times. Shona Kelly Wray's untimely death is almost impossible to understand, except if one reaches into a realm better occupied by ancient mythology than by modern reason – of wrathful gods – as if struck by a thunderbolt from Zeus.

Who could anticipate such a fate for Shona, the author of the 2009 book, *Communities and Crisis*, about the impact of the Black Death on Bologna in the middle of the 14th Century – at a time when a plague wiped out over a third of the population of Europe, and over half of the Italians. She wrote, not about the pathogen, not even about the dead, but of the survivors at a time when mysticism and fear dominated Europe well before the Enlightenment. Now as if struck by lightning in the heart of her beloved subject area – Italy – she has joined the countless numbers who in that dark time some 650 years ago meant a premature end that almost destroyed our civilization.

My memory of Shona also takes us to Italy, and dates from 2002 to 2003, our year as Fellows at the American Academy in Rome. I had known Jim and Celia for years before because Jim and I were faculty colleagues at U.C. Berkeley when, after moving west to teach there, I became engaged in research on earthquake resistant construction. But it was very special to get to know their daughter, Shona, an academic as well, recognized and accomplished in a completely different discipline.

Among our colleagues there, I came to know Shona and enjoyed our many dinners together in the communal dining hall of Academy. For me, she and a few special colleagues were what made that year so meaningful to me. It was her intellect that connected us, offering opportunities for continuing conversations across disciplines – tied together by our common interest in Italy, its culture, its architecture and its life.

I will miss her, as everyone who also had the chance to know her most certainly will. My heart goes out to her beloved parents, her husband, and their children.