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In Memoriam: Judith Perlstein

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[Editor's Note: Judith Perlstein, MSW served as the Assistant Director of Field Education at Boston University School of Social Work from 1993–2018. Prior to working at BUSSW, she was the director of training at the Somerville Mental Health Clinic for many years. She was a 1974 alumna of the Smith College School for Social Work. This Kudos tribute is written by Trudy Zimmerman, Assistant Dean of Field Education at Boston University School of Social Work. Trudy's testimony is a reflection on the power of relationships and how they are sustained in the complexity of the work we do as field educators.]



Judith Perlstein, MSW

On October 10, 2018 Judith Perlstein, my work partner for more than 25 years, died. This was two years after she was diagnosed with cancer. It was commonly known around the Boston University School of Social Work that Judith and I referred to ourselves as “Trudith” – because students often couldn’t tell us apart, thought of us as interchangeable, and would often address one of us by the other’s name. We thought “Trudith” captured not only the students’ perceptions, but also reflected the way in which we worked together.

Field Education can be lonely work because one is often confronted with thorny problems that can be understood from many perspectives. We have obligations to students to ensure that they are well-trained and well-treated, to agencies that care for such vulnerable people and communities,

and to the profession to ensure that students who graduate with a MSW are prepared for practice. Judith and I always had each other as we sorted out these issues and made decisions that often were not easy or welcomed by one side or the other. But our work together was more than just dealing with problems. We were a good team because we balanced each other — I, the more cautious, rule-oriented, and deliberative person, and Judith, the more adventuresome, action-oriented one who often pushed the envelope, encouraging me to take chances, speak up, and try something new. Many of the innovations and special projects we undertook over a 25-year period came from Judith's vision, and her ability to convince me to move forward. Always in the forefront was Judith's commitment to social justice and equity.

Our partnership was also enriched by our friendship and the many life milestones that occurred over the time we knew each other. We shared good times and bad and learned from one another along the way. When Judith was diagnosed with cancer in December of 2016, she allowed me both to support her and also to share my own worry and grief with her. Those were perhaps some of our closest moments.

Judith was a model for me in many ways, the fullness of her life was something I admired and aspired to, although I will not ride a bike to work or wake up at 5 in the morning to row with a crew team. She encouraged me to trust myself, to follow my instincts, to take risks and to be good to myself. Judith's spirit and love and strength, including her dedication to social work field education, are gifts she has left for all of us.