



IN MEMORIAM

Leona Shapiro
Assistant Professor of Nutrition
UC Berkeley
1919 – 2009

Leona R. Shapiro, a leading public health nutritionist who played major roles in pioneering research on child obesity, has died at the age of 89.

Shapiro, former assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley, died at her home in Berkeley on Tuesday, February 24, 2009, following an illness.

Shapiro began her decades- long career at UC Berkeley in 1958 as a lecturer in public health nutrition at the School of Public Health. She also held a concurrent position as nutritionist for the City of Berkeley's Department of Public Health.

Shapiro worked closely with Ruth Huenemann, a UC Berkeley professor emerita who was the founding chair of the campus's public health nutrition program and who led the landmark Berkeley Longitudinal Nutrition Study, which followed children from age six months to 16 years. Hundreds of children born in Berkeley in 1969 and 1970 were enrolled in that study, "one of the longest and most in- depth studies on growth and nutrition in the country," said Pat Crawford, director of UC Berkeley's Dr. Robert C. and Veronica Atkins Center for Weight and Health and a close colleague of Shapiro's. "It was one of the first nutrition studies in the country to systematically chart the growth and development from birth of children in an effort to understand the multitude of factors influencing the development of childhood obesity."

Huenemann, who died in 2005, led the study during its first eight years. In 1977, Shapiro took the helm, securing funding for eight additional years of follow- up.

Crawford credited Shapiro's ties to the City of Berkeley for helping make the longitudinal study a success. "Leona was instrumental because she helped make connections to the city's schools as well as the medical community," said Crawford, who coauthored a number of research papers and reports with Shapiro.

One of the major findings of the Berkeley study was determination of the critical periods of obesity development in children. Shapiro noted at the time that the research dispelled a common view that "fat babies become fat children" and focused more attention on the importance of toddlers' eating and activity patterns as a determinant of subsequent obesity.

Many of the lessons learned from this study were communicated in a 1985 report, "Children and Weight: A Changing Perspective," authored by Shapiro and 10 other health experts who were members of the Ad Hoc Interdisciplinary Committee on Children and Weight. The report focused on positive parenting practices and revealed ways in which obsession with thinness was leading to an increase in disordered eating and health problems among adolescents.

In addition to her work on the Berkeley Longitudinal Nutrition Study, Shapiro collaborated with Dr. Lester Breslow, who established the Alameda County Human Population Laboratory, a pioneering study on the life behaviors connected to disease prevention.

“The notion that one's lifestyle can be important in preventing chronic disease really wasn't known 30 years ago,” said Sarah Samuels, one of Shapiro's former graduate students. “Before, disease was more about treatment, and nutrition more about preventing deficiencies. Leona contributed to our understanding of the evidence around the associations between diet and health.”

Shapiro was born in New York City on September 5, 1919, and grew up in Chicago. “Our parents instilled in us the value of education,” said Shapiro's sister, Ruth Kadish. “For women to get advanced degrees was not common at that time, but we were brought up knowing that would happen. We knew we were going to college.”

Shapiro earned her B.S. degree in nutrition and dietetics at the University of Illinois in 1940, followed by work at Philadelphia's Jewish Hospital (now the Albert Einstein Medical Center), first as a dietetic intern and later as a dietitian. In 1944, during World War II, Shapiro joined the U.S. Army as a commissioned officer. She served as a dietitian in the Medical Department until 1946.

After her service in the U.S. Army, Shapiro worked at the Chicago Department of Welfare for nearly five years before enrolling in Columbia University's Teachers College, where she earned her M.S. degree in public health nutrition in 1953.

She then settled in California, where she worked as a dietitian and clinic nutritionist with the Kaiser Foundation Hospital from 1953 to 1958. After Kaiser, Shapiro began working as a lecturer at UC Berkeley and as a nutritionist with the City of Berkeley's Department of Health. As she maintained both jobs, Shapiro worked towards her doctorate degree in public health (received in 1974) at UC Berkeley's School of Public Health.

In addition to her research, Shapiro was a popular and well-regarded teacher at UC Berkeley. “She took her responsibility as a mentor very seriously, investing a lot in her students' success, giving them real world experiences and acknowledging their achievements,” said Samuels, who received her doctorate degree in public health nutrition. “I think she felt that bringing up a new generation of strong public health nutrition researchers was an important part of her role at UC Berkeley and an important contribution to the field.”

Samuels, who went on to found Samuels & Associates Inc., an Oakland-based public health consulting firm, noted that more than 50 former students and colleagues gathered together two years ago to celebrate Shapiro's influence in their lives. “Everybody noted how important she was in their careers, how she opened up professional opportunities for them,” said Samuels.

At UC Berkeley, Shapiro held positions as assistant professor, adjunct assistant professor, and assistant research nutritionist before retiring in 1987.

Shapiro's professional honors include the Mary Rourke Memorial Award from the American Public Health Association's Public Health Nutrition Section, the Mary Swartz Rose Fellowship from the American Dietetic Association, and the Dolores Nyhus Memorial Award, the highest honor given by the California Dietetic Association.

Throughout her career, Shapiro served her community in a variety of service organizations. In 1968, she became the founding president of Friends of Portable Meals in Berkeley, which later changed its name to Meals on Wheels. She was instrumental in raising funds for the city's program and was also a board member of Alameda County Meals on Wheels.

Shapiro is survived by her sister, Ruth Kadish, of San Francisco; a niece, Johanna Mandel, of El Cerrito, Calif.; a nephew, David Kadish, of San Francisco; and a grandniece and grandnephew.

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Office of Media Relations