

ANN HERRING

Shelley Saunders
1950-2008



Shelley Rae Saunders (PhD, University of Toronto, 1977) passed away at the age of 58 from pancreatic cancer on 14 May 14 2008. A Tier I Canada Research Chair in Human Disease and Population Relationships, Shelley died at the height of her distinguished career in skeletal biology and as a much loved and admired professor of anthropology at McMaster University.

Known to almost everyone simply as “Shelley”, she was born in Toronto, Ontario on 28 February 1950, the middle child in a sibship of three. Her father was an aeronautical engineer with the legendary, ill-fated Avro Canada CF-105 Arrow program, which prompted a move to the USA when the program was scrapped in 1959. Several years later her family returned to Toronto where Shelley attended high school and, later, obtained her BSc, MA and PhD in anthropology at the University of Toronto.

While studying for her BSc, Shelley was inspired to specialize in physical anthropology by lectures delivered by the late David Hughes in a first year introductory anthropology course and this stimulated her passion for the anthropological approach to science, skeletal biology, and evolution. For her doctoral dissertation, *The Development and Distribution of Discrete Traits of the Human Infracranial Skeleton*, she studied over 1000 skeletons housed at museums in Canada and the United States and explored the changes that occur in hard and soft tissues during growth and development. Her fascination with the developing human skeletal, and how it can help recover information about the lives of children in the past, remained a lifelong research interest. She completed and defended the dissertation while holding her first university appointment as Senior Demonstrator and Lecturer in Anatomy at McGill University (1976-1979). There she developed a number of teaching methods – often involving games, humour, and experiential education – that characterized her engaging style of active learning.

A woman of extraordinary energy and stamina, Shelley’s career was dominated by three large projects that involved extensive international networks of collaborators, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows. The first, initiated in 1989, centered on the analysis of human remains and historical documents from a large nineteenth century cemetery from St. Thomas’ Anglican Church, Belleville, Ontario (1821-1874). The remains of over 600 individuals were excavated, making the St. Thomas’ cemetery sample one of the largest in North America at the time and a key site for evaluating and comparing long-term trends in health and nutrition in the Western Hemisphere. Shelley’s focus on growth and development led her to study extensively 282 individuals under the age of 15 years of age, testing methods of sex determination and estimating age-at-death. Her research broke new ground in understanding infant nutrition, the processes of breastfeeding and weaning in historic populations and for evaluating the extent to which mortuary samples represent the living population from which they were derived.

The second project that occupied Shelley’s imagination involved research with Luca Bondioli and Robert Macchiarelli (L. Pigorini Museum, Rome, Italy) on the Imperial Roman necropolis of Isola Sacra (1st to 3rd centuries ACE), located near the mouth of the Tiber River southwest of Rome. The project was instrumental in revealing new information about streams of migration to Rome from within and outside the Empire, and for uncovering previously unknown features of the Roman diet, such as the extent to which marine foods were incorporated into meals.

In collaboration with Simon Hillson (University College London) and Charles FitzGerald (McMaster), Shelley studied a Greek Classical Period cemetery (6th to 4th century BCE) on the

Mediterranean island of Astypalaia. Astypalaia has the largest depository of childrens' remains known for the ancient world, with some 2400 mostly intact infants excavated so far. By analyzing the enamel crowns of infant teeth, it has been possible to assign accurate ages to these children, most of whom died at birth. A major aim of this project is to construct new growth standards for infants and Shelley was actively involved in this analysis until her death.

Always in the forefront of developments in her field, in the mid-1990s Shelley recognized the emerging potential of ancient DNA research and the need to establish a dedicated laboratory facility at McMaster. In typical fashion, she set about raising funds, eventually founding and directing the *McMaster Paleogenetics Institute* (1998-2003), learning new research methods and attracting graduate students to work in this area (now the *McMaster Ancient DNA Center* under the direction of Hendrik Poinar, CRC). In 2003 she initiated and developed the *McMaster Anthropology Hard Tissue and Light Microscopy Laboratory*, a state-of-the-art facility for studying microscopic structures in bones and teeth.

For decades, Shelley also acted as consulting forensic anthropologist to the Regional Coroner, Ontario, and to police forces in Ontario and New Brunswick. Her assistance in identifying human remains – some three or four per year, some well-publicized in the media – was strongly motivated by her desire to help families locate missing relatives. Her own family – especially her two children to whom she was devoted – was the center of her life and she felt keenly the distress of families searching for loved ones. In 1991 she received a distinguished award from the American Society of Forensic Odontologists.

Among Shelley's 'firsts', she was the first biological anthropologist to receive a Tier 1 Canada Research Chair (SSHRC 2000) and the first biological anthropologist elected to the Royal Society of Canada (2001). Her CRC was renewed for a second term in the year prior to her death. A kind and caring mentor to her students, she received the President's Award for Graduate Instruction in 1999. Despite her stature in her field, Shelley was unfailingly modest and more comfortable discussing her students' accomplishments. In the week prior to her death, she expressed the desire to establish and fund a scholarship for graduate students in skeletal biology. Because of this, McMaster now has the *Shelley Saunders Scholarships in Anthropology*, a wonderful legacy for students and a tribute to her dedication to teaching and research. The first scholarship was awarded in the fall of 2010.

*Dr. Ann Herring
Department of Anthropology
McMaster University*

(Author's title given as of the time of writing)