

# Elena Gascón-Vera

In memoriam

Elena passed away on August 12, 2021 in Madrid after a two-year bout with lung cancer. She was 77. She is survived by her spouse and partner of 25 years Kaaren Parma, her sister Paloma, her niece Beatriz, her nephew Pablo, and their children Matilda, Telmo, Martina, Gonzalo, Carlota and Mikel.

Elena was born and raised in Madrid, Spain, where she knew first-hand the after effects of the Spanish Civil War. As a free thinker, she needed to escape Franco's repressive society. She first came to the US to teach Spanish in Dubuque, Iowa. There, she confirmed her passion for studying literature and culture, as well as teaching. She went on to complete a Ph.D. at Yale. This was her second Ph.D. The first was from the Universidad Complutense in Madrid. Then she came to Wellesley over forty years ago and the rest is history.

During that history she enriched the College not only through her own teaching and research, but also by inviting some of the most prominent emerging figures in the Hispanic world as visiting instructors. She did so both to enrich our own intellectual life and to make sure that the long-standing prominence of Wellesley among Spanish-speaking countries was secured. The College impacted these visiting scholars as well, as witnessed to by the latest book by one of Spain's leading philosophers and writers, Javier Marías, *El Quijote de Wellesley* (Alfaguara 2016), a compilation of the notes he took in preparation for the class he taught on Cervantes' masterpiece back in the fall of 1984.

Elena Gascón-Vera. Rarely has a colleague made such a difference in terms our intellectual life and our calling to educate women. Part of Elena's ability to identify rising talent was due to her own pivotal role in cultivating the arts in Spain after the restoration of democracy. Elena and her identical twin Paloma were famous for their artistic salons. Pedro Almodóvar, the Oscar winning filmmaker, made some of his first movies in their home on a Super8 camera while he was still working as a telephone operator. Their annual birthday party on December 21 was de-rigueur for the artistic world of Spain: from Almodóvar, to Rafael Moneo (architect of the Davis Museum), to the trail blazing dramatist Agustín Gómez-Arcos, to one of Spain's fundamental feminist novelists and journalists, Rosa Montero, to countless others. And at these gatherings they always served two American Butterball Tom turkeys which Elena carried with her in her luggage when she flew home at the end of the fall semester. The turkeys in Spain (tough and scrawny at the time) were just not good enough.

Thanks to Elena, Rosa Montero herself came here twice to teach. Google Rosa Montero and you will get just an inkling of her importance in the Hispanic world. The first time, Rosa went back to Spain and didn't say nice things about us. Instead of being offended, Elena retorted, "Well, she obviously did not learn enough; bring her back." And so, Rosa did come back about five years later and taught again. The second time accomplished the task: Rosa went back to Spain again and ended up writing in praise of Wellesley and the importance of women's colleges. The story tells much about Elena: When confronted with an opposing view she did not respond with offence or rancor, but attempted to seek out dialogue and deeper exploration.

Elena authored books and over ninety articles on the Spanish Middle Ages, as well as on contemporary film and feminism. What marks her works is the depth of insight and the sheer freedom afforded by a brilliant mind whose only real fear is not taking risks. She was devoted to

the Medieval and Renaissance Studies Program and was always one to build community. For, other than a brilliant mind, Elena had an equally high-voltage heart.

After her retirement in 2016, Elena lived primarily in Madrid, surrounded by her loving family and more loving friends than most of us would incur in two lifetimes. Her final years were marked by the same enthusiasm for travel that had always been central in her life. Elena once explained: there are three periods in which you live life most intensely: 1. When you are very young; 2. When you are in love; and 3. When you travel. Elena especially enjoyed places that others shunned, and her most recent destinations included Iran, Ethiopia, Senegal, Bora Bora, and Nepal.

In the south of Spain one sings and dances what are called “Sevillanas,” an iconic genre that is instantly recognized throughout the world for its thin slinky men in tight pants and women in bolts and bolts of polka-dotted, ruffled dresses who create a collision of passion and respectability through foot stomping and dramatic poses. Right now, one of the most haunting of Sevillanas comes to mind. It is called “El Adiós,” literally “The Goodbye.” The refrain claims that “Algo se muere en el alma cuando un amigo se va.” (Something dies in the soul when a friend goes away.)