

IN MEMORIAM

Lana Schwebel

by Danielle Tumminio, M.Div. '06, S.T.M. '08

ON THE WALL OF THE INSTITUTE of Sacred Music near the practice rooms, hangs a photograph of a young professor wearing a black turtleneck, her arms crossed, her wristwatch frozen to 12:35 p.m. Her expression is timeless, refreshing, and energized, her eyes eager to engage with the observer's, her smile infectious.

The photograph is iconic of Lana Schwebel, former assistant professor of religion and literature at YDS/ISM. A graduate of Barnard College, she received a Ph.D. in English from the University of Pennsylvania. The young medievalist arrived at Yale in the fall of 2002. She gave YDS the honor of being its first Jewish professor, inviting many into her life through her own religious practices. ISM professor Jaime Lara, S.T.M. '90, remembers sharing an "improvised Shabbat meal with her on the medieval isle of Gotland, Sweden."

Schwebel made the world her classroom, welcoming others to explore with her, whether in Scandinavia, Mexico, or New Haven. YDS professor Carolyn Sharp, M.A.R. '94, recalls this as fundamental to Schwebel's character: "She was never fully captured by any one context—devout Jew teaching in a Christian environment, fiercely independent woman and devoted family member."

Schwebel's fascination with life was boundless: She was as awestruck by medieval ghost stories as by pie and ice cream and the circus. "She seemed to thrive by taking in new people and experiences; we should all live like that," said close friend and YDS bookstore manager Lisabeth Huck, M.Div. '88.

When Schwebel arrived, she, Huck and then ISM Director Margot Fassler founded the Literature and Spirituality Series, which brought writers to the Quad. Schwebel went door-to-door to publicize the inaugural event, and eventually peeked into the career counseling office of Susan Olson, '93 M.Div. Olson recalls Schwebel introducing herself and thereafter inviting her to dinner with the featured poet. "Lana lived her life in exclamation points," reflects Olson. "The difference between Lana's life and everyone else's is really a matter of punctuation."

Schwebel's punctuation-mark enthusiasm was contagious, especially among her students. Elizabeth Churchill, M.A.R. '06, recalls that Schwebel spent a half an hour with each stu-



dent at midterm, dissecting prior work and offering suggestions for final papers. "She inspired all of us to be better," Churchill recalls. "She was about improvement and helping you realize your potential."

Schwebel, a professor at Stern College Yeshiva University at the time of her death, was a consummate teacher. As guest presenter at ISM's weekly colloquium in April, she said, "Along with our inability to understand... death and loss comes the desire to understand it." But in closing she remarked that in the face of heartbreaking, unjust, and inexplicable tragedy, there is the "possibility of reconciliation, not through a comprehension that's beyond our abilities, but through a leap of faith."

Lana Schwebel died from injuries sustained in a car collision on July 7, 2007, while traveling from Lake Baikal in Siberia. She was 35 years old. Her portrait will remain in the Institute of Sacred Music, an enduring tribute to her life. In addition, the Lana Schwebel Lecture in Religion and Literature has been established in her honor at the ISM by her parents.