

Miriam Harriet Labbok, MD, MPH, IBCLC in memoriam



Miriam at the Global Forum in Arusha, Tanzania

WABA is deeply saddened at the loss of Miriam Labbok, a much loved member of the WABA family and long-serving member of the Steering Committee. Miriam passed away on August 13 surrounded by loved ones. Though she succumbed to the illness, she fought back with her indomitable spirit, to the end.

The breastfeeding world has lost a passionate advocate, mentor and academic, but we can draw comfort from the fact that her work lives on through us. She is survived by her family, friends, colleagues and her many godchildren across the world – young breastfeeding advocates who she has inspired and taught. We share our sadness with all who knew and loved her.

HER JOURNEY

Miriam was a force to be reckoned with...



CGBI exhibition area during the 2010 WABA Global Forum. Bayview Beach Resort, Penang, Malaysia

Miriam was born in New Jersey in 1949. She attended the University of Pennsylvania and then Tulane University where she received her M.D. and M.P.H. degrees. A gifted student, she had an ability to quickly and incisively absorb and process information and was ever-ready to impart her knowledge and give back to society. A passion for public health was evident throughout her career, and her commitment to maternal and child health has helped build healthier communities worldwide.

Miriam was a force to be reckoned with, garnering over 40 years of research, technical assistance, training, and program development experience related to nutrition issues and maternal/child health. The practical

impacts of Miriam's work can be seen in more than 50 countries. She always kept a delicate balance between being a source of knowledge and being an approachable and warm teacher. For her work on improving women's and children's lives, she was awarded the USAID Science and Technology, LLLI Distinguished Service, Tulane Alumnus of the Year, the University of Medicine and Dentistry Alumnus of the Year, and the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School Alumnus of the Year Awards.



Miriam (front row, second from left) with the WABA Secretariat. Penang, Malaysia

Striving for a healthier world

Miriam dedicated over 30 years to breastfeeding and related issues. She served as Professor, Director, Consultant, Advisor and Fellow at many prominent universities such as the Johns Hopkins and Georgetown Universities. She was the founding member and Past President of the International Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine (ABM) and founded the Gillings School's Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute. Miriam believed in policy change as a way forward, and also held positions at public health organisations both locally and globally, including WHO, UNICEF and USAID.

She has published more than 300 chapters, articles, monographs, and abstracts, and has presented hundreds of invited lectures and seminars. Her work focused on the creation of evidence-based sustainable improvement in the reproductive health continuum, primarily in birth, breastfeeding and birth-spacing practices. Her passion was to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and develop programs and policies that support all women so that they may achieve quality and equity in reproductive health.



Miriam's birthday celebration during the 2010 WABA Steering Committee Meeting. Bayview Beach Resort, Penang, Malaysia

In 2007, she joined WABA and has provided invaluable support, advice and guidance as a member of the Steering Committee. She created the Golden Bow initiative – a symbol for social change, which also carries many meanings within its own design. Dato (Dr.) Anwar Fazal, Chairman Emeritus of WABA says, “We will always remember Miriam’s Golden Bow, from the time she was at UNICEF. Miriam is the golden bow that the movement will always cherish.” Miriam represented WABA and our cause at many conferences and meetings. It was always rewarding to engage with her, particularly in conceptualising the Breastfeeding-friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI).

Looking to the future

We mourn her passing, but celebrate the life of Dr. Miriam Labbok, a towering contributor to the wellbeing of mothers and children. It is up to us to carry on Miriam’s legacy. She has touched the lives of many, both professionally and personally, inspiring the younger generation of advocates to be involved in this world and transforming their thinking to understand that breastfeeding is and always will be related and relevant to their lives.

Her funeral service will be held on August 15 at 2 PM at the Judea Reform Congregation in Durham, NC 27705. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made in her honor to The Miriam Labbok Program Research CGBI Acceleration Endowment Fund at the Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute. Checks can be written to the Public Health Foundation and sent to SPH Advancement, UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, 107 Rosenau Hall, Campus Box 7400, Chapel Hill, NC 27599. Please note “In Memory of Miriam Labbok” on the check’s memo line. Miriam’s family has requested that we refrain from posting this news on Facebook or Twitter.

TRIBUTES

Felicity Savage

Chair of WABA Steering Committee

Hearing with profound sadness of Miriam's untimely death, I recall the first time that I met her, in December 1988 at the Interagency Workshop on Health Care Practices Related to Breastfeeding held at Georgetown University in Washington. Miriam was working at Georgetown, engaged in research on the Lactation Amenorrhoea Method of family planning, one of the key fields for the promotion of breastfeeding. She was responsible for much of the organisation of the Workshop, and welcomed participants with memorable charm and efficiency.

We met many times afterwards, as the Baby-

Friendly Hospital Initiative developed and progressed, in our respective roles at Universities and in the UN, as me

members of various breastfeeding organisations, and most recently with WABA. Miriam was caring and fun, and good to share life's ups and downs with. She had an appreciative and supportive attitude to colleagues, helping us to feel that our contributions were worthwhile, even if she did not completely agree. As Co-Chair of WABA's Steering Committee, she provided wise and incisive counsel to us all. She was a great thinker with many ideas on breastfeeding, reflected in her many outstanding publications, achievements and awards, and she was always generous in sharing her extensive knowledge. We will sorely miss Miriam's wisdom, creativity, warmth and liveliness, and will carry her spirit with us as we continue the work.

Dato' (Dr.) Anwar Fazal,

Chairperson Emeritus, World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA).

This year would have been a quarter a century of my working with Miriam Labbok.

She was part of the six-person Agency for International Development (AID) of the USA that worked on and drafted the historic Innocenti Declaration on the Protection, Promotion and Support of Breastfeeding adopted by 32 governments and 10 international agencies on the 1st of August 1990 in Florence, Italy.

This document was the soul, the charter, the framework and the plan for action for the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA). The context was further enhanced by the Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding adopted on 18 May 2002 by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Miriam was engaged in the team for this document on behalf of UNICEF.

My first personal chat with her was at the University of Georgetown, USA, in 1991 when I went to attend the 25 years celebration of Ralph Nader, consumer activist and author of the classic book "Unsafe at Any Speed", which was also being held at the University. She continued to be passionate about the work, being a student of the late Prof. Dr. Michael Latham, who was her mentor. She continued to be active through her links with La Leche League International (LLL), the International Lactation Consultant Association (ILCA) and later at the National Alliance for Breastfeeding Advocacy (NABA) – a kind of WABA for North America.

In 2001, Miriam took on the position in UNICEF of Senior Adviser for Infant and Young Child Feeding. She left in 2006 to head the Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute. She became active in WABA again through being elected the North American representative of the Steering Committee of WABA. She was also a key player in the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine, one of WABA's core partners.

Miriam gave WABA and the breastfeeding movement much time and many gifts. One of those unforgettable gifts was [The Golden Bow Initiative](#) which WABA took up as a collaboration with UNICEF and launched it at the 2nd WABA Global Forum held on 23rd to 27th September in Arusha, Tanzania, in 2001. I attach the details of that initiative below (or see www.unicef.org/programme/breastfeeding/bow.htm) and hope we can celebrate that again this year with a relaunch in remembrance of her quarter century involvement with WABA.

She will live on in all her good works.



Dr. Rukhsana Haider

WABA Steering Committee :

Miriam has "left us" – "transitioned" – "moved on" – "died"....these are words that I was dreading to hear, but they came today, and with the realization came this awful, sinking feeling of great personal loss..... It is less than a year since Miriam was diagnosed with a life threatening illness that has now taken her away from this world. We were at the WABA/Unicef Symposium at Stockholm in November last year, which she could not join because she was going to have some tests, and she called to tell me what the doctors were suspecting, but requested me not to share with anyone till they were sure, except for Felicity. Those days were some of the most difficult I have been through, trying to look cheerful and involved, but all the time thinking of Miriam and what she must be going through, and praying that it would be something treatable. Weeks passed by before she got a firm diagnosis, but she remained optimistic and amazingly strong after that too, following the doctors' instructions regarding her treatment. Although noticeably weaker, she managed to travel to Geneva in December for the WHO/Unicef external review group meeting for BFHI guidance because she felt so deeply about it, and we managed to spend some time together. She insisted on treating me to dinner and I had to accept when she said she didn't know if she would have another chance.....She could not make it to Geneva in April this year for the

second BFHI meeting but she was on Skype all through and more actively participating than any of us. It was hard to believe she was so unwell, but that's just the way Miriam was – wishing to contribute towards improvement of mothers and babies health until the very end!

What can I say about Miriam that others do not know? It is difficult to put feelings into words at a time like this..... She was a good and wonderful human being, caring, loving, generous, sincere, straight forward, never hesitating to express her opinions, and of course, absolutely passionate about breastfeeding. My mind flashes back to the days when I first read her publications on breastfeeding and contraception many, many years ago and was totally impressed. Then when she was a Unicef New York staff, and I was with WHO-SEARO, we would interact often for work and at meetings and our common interests laid the ground for a friendship that became deeper as time went on. As co-chairs of the WABA Steering Committee, we had the opportunity to work together and it was so easy to do so because our opinions did not differ. Dearest Miriam, I will always associate you with the Lactation Amenorrhoea Method (LAM) (I always promote actively along with exclusive breastfeeding), and with the first practical definitions of breastfeeding status that are still so useful. We will all miss you dreadfully even though you will be in our hearts and minds forever and ever. Rest in peace, dear friend.

Amal Omer-Salim

Co-executive director, WABA :

Miriam was one of those persons who glowed.. even when we last met, a few weeks before her demise, her eyes twinkled, especially when we talked about work. Her super intelligent mind and enthusiasm made conversations very interesting and dynamic. I remember many years ago, in Georgetown, USA, how in awe i was to meet the woman behind LAM! She readily shared her deep knowledge with anyone who asked. In addition to her brilliance, dedication and open mind, Miriam was a loving and warm personality. She also had a great sense of humour. I will miss and remember her dearly. We will continue in her footsteps to revive and expand the breastfeeding movement. Love and respect dearest Miriam.



Jay Sharma

Co-executive director, WABA :

Amal and I sat by Miriam's bedside for half an hour. We had been greeted by a warm smile and hugs, which took some effort on Miriam's part. By this stage Miriam was no longer in treatment. With her characteristic bluntness laced with humour, she exclaimed "So this is what hospice care looks like, folks."

She spent the next half an hour talking a little about herself and her circumstances. She expressed her frustrations but through her sheer will and determination, also shared her hopes for the future of WABA. As I hugged her goodbye, she said "I'm with you", and she will be, as she will with all of us.

Elien Rouw:

These are sad days, for WABA, for ABM and for the whole breastfeeding community. After the passing of Audrey Naylor and now of Miriam Labbok I just wanted to share with you my grief. I really hope, and will work on it, that WABA and ABM will work together in the future in the direction these wonderful ladies have shown and did

work too. One of the last emails I received from Miriam was about WABA and our cooperation, as a reaction on the thoughts about WABA and ABM and she will further inspire us. We owe this as a remembrance to these wonderful grand ladies.

Judy Canahuati:

Sadly sharing the news with my breastfeeding community friends that Miriam Labbok died early today. She had been in hospice for several weeks. Miriam never had any biological children, but with her strong research legacy and the work she did to build the Breastfeeding Center at the University of North Carolina, we are ALL in many ways her children.

Geraldine Cahill, IBCLC

Board Member, ILCA

What a wonderful mentor, educator and friend the breastfeeding world has lost in Miriam. She impacted so many of us for so many years. I had the honour of meeting her when I became an ILCA/WABA fellow in 2014. I was overwhelmed at how 'normal' and friendly she was. She was full of humour and was very kind to me during my visit to Penang. I am sure her spirit will continue to help us over the coming years. RIP Miriam.

Dick Padlo

Executive Director, ILCA

I had the honor of attending the memorial tribute for Miriam. It was a very moving, inspirational, and spirited celebration of her life punctuated by heartfelt testimonials, tears, and laughter.

Among some one hundred of her closest relatives, friends, and admirers, I was in awe of her multifaceted life— a Doctor, a teacher, a mentor to so many, a talented musician, a compassionate friend, and a dedicated advocate for breastfeeding.

In her last days, Miriam expressed her fear, not of dying, but of whether or not she would be remembered. Based on the tribute heard at her memorial, there is little question her legacy lives on in the hearts of the many who shared her earthly journey.

Aishatu Bukar

It is indeed very sad losing Miriam at this crucial time when her services are most needed. I condole with all of us and pray that what she has taught us will not vanish, but continue to linger on. She will forever be remembered for her hard work.

Gloria Ndekei, OGW

CEO and Founder – Tuwaa, The Women's Institute.

I send my sincere condolences. Our dear God will see the family through this difficult time. And for the WABA family, it's a great Loss...Miriam was a great advocate and a dedicated supporter of WABA.

We in Kenya shall miss her dearly next week – on the 25th of August – at the launch of the second phase of the Better Business Practices for Children (BBPC) programme.

Sir Richard Jolly

WABA IAC

Miriam's work, research and writings helped UNICEF greatly, as I know firsthand during the period of Jim Grant. This underlay the breastfeeding and better weaning elements in the GOBI priorities to the formulation of the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative in the early 1990s.

Raghunath

We are shocked at the demise of our beloved Miriam. We convey our consolation to the bereaved family members and pray to God for peaceful rest of the departed soul. It is great loss for children and mothers across the world.

Claudio Schuftan

I share this grief. The second giant after Urban Jonsson that we lost this year. I never met Miriam, but she was more than a reference to all of us in nutrition work.

Abena Okra

Founder, Pregnancy School Ghana.

We at the Eve's Foundation, the Pregnancy School Ghana wish to express our condolence to WABA, family and friends of Dr. Miriam Labbok for her demise. In Ghana we say "Damirefa duahe" meaning "sorry to the deceased and wish her soul well." May the good Lord give her soul a perfect, peaceful rest.

James Achanyi-Fontem

Coordinator, WABA Men's Initiative

Prof. Miriam Labbok was a committed and strong supporter of breastfeeding and WABA activities. I really regret that we will forever miss the diligent icon we had. We will remember her and pray that her soul will rest in perfect peace.

Professor (Dr.) M. Q. K. Talukder

WABA IAC

It is a reality that all of us will depart for the destination we are accountable for. Miriam will always be remembered by all in the breastfeeding world, and in particular by WABA.