

CONFERENCE

2021 Swanberg Award Tribute Lori L. Alexander, MTPW, ELS, MWC—A Tribute

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ABSTRACT

Lori L. Alexander is the 2021 recipient of American Medical Writers Association’s (AMWA) Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award, which is given to an active member who has made distinguished contributions to medical communication or rendered unusual and distinguished services to the medical profession. Sadly, Lori lost a brief but courageous battle with cancer in June 2021. In the following pages, you’ll hear from Lori Alexander’s colleagues, friends, and her wife, Deb. We hope you’ll gain insight into who Lori was as a person, her passions, her professional accomplishments, and the immense mark she made on the field of medical communication.

Lori L. Alexander was one of America’s most influential medical communicators. Her work in medical communication, extensive service as a volunteer leader of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA), experience as an educator within the field, and passion for health literacy and creating clear medical information empowered thousands of medical writers and editors, whose work in turn has touched the lives of millions of people.

Clear communication is essential to scientific research, meaningful patient-physician interactions, and better health outcomes. When the resources produced by medical communicators enable people to better understand their treatment options, it helps them make more informed health care decisions. Medical writers engage in developing the required documentation for clinical trials and approvals of new drugs and medical devices, as well as with writing reports on trial results and implications. Medical writers and editors also help prepare the millions of science, health, and medicine articles published each year.

Lori’s work in medical communication spanned a variety of settings and she was a master at editing, writing, and developing educational resources for health care professionals and lay audiences. She began her medical

communication career as an assistant editor in the editorial department of Lahey Clinical Medical Center and later became a senior copyeditor of the *Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery*. In 1998 Lori became assistant director of the Publications Department of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO). In 2004 Lori and Deb founded Editorial Rx, Inc, specializing in medical writing and editing, and publications development and management. In this capacity Lori worked with medical and health-related associations, advocacy groups, research foundations, medical institutions, medical publishers, government agencies, and physician-authors.

Lori’s contribution to the field includes service both within and outside of AMWA. She was also an active member of the Editorial Freelancers Association and the Center for Plain Language. The University of California San Diego (UCSD) Extension recruited Lori to help set up and develop a Medical Writing and Editing Certificate Program on regulatory writing, journal publications, continuing education, and grant writing. She was also an instructor of Medical Terminology and Business Communication at Newbury College and she developed and led several AMWA Workshops, including “Medical Terminology” and “Using Principles of Classical Rhetoric to Enhance Medical Communication.”

Lori joined the AMWA staff after 6 years of service on the AMWA Board. Lori understood the roles of volunteer leader and staff and the important synergy of the relationship in achieving organization goals. She called the opportunity to guide and manage the educational program at the association that had been “my professional home for nearly 20 years” an “opportunity of a lifetime.” Working with her in both capacities was an exciting and enriching opportunity of my lifetime. The AMWA staff enjoyed working with Lori in both capacities, and we are incredibly grateful for her leadership, mentorship, and friendship.

—Susan Krug, MS, CAE, AMWA Executive Director

Lori wore many hats at AMWA: Journal Editor, Chair of the Annual Conference Programming Committee and the Education Committee, workshop leader, head of the strategic planning initiative, President of the Board of Directors (BOD), and most recently, AMWA Education Director. I don't know which hat was her favorite, but I do know she was thrilled and honored to be able to use her vision to propel AMWA Education into the future.

I got to know Lori after she invited me to join the *AMWA Journal* Editorial Board. Her passion for AMWA was obvious, and she was never shy about reminding us that we needed to create content for medical writers AND editors in all work settings.

Lori was a masterful communicator. She loved words, and she loved to write, and she loved inspiring that same passion in others.

Among Lori's many gifts was her unique ability to recognize leadership skills in others. And once she got you to say "yes" the first time, she wouldn't let go. Many of you know what I'm talking about. Lori was a quiet but forceful leader who encouraged people to use their talents, to move outside of their comfort zones, and to aspire to be more. She inspired us by her example.

Lori was first my colleague, but she quickly became my friend. I was inspired by her ability to always look forward—to that next webinar, to the next workshop, to the next conference, to the next trip to Broadway. Lori had a deep passion for giving and doing for others, and she did more than simply write a check. She regularly prepared meals for residents of a local shelter, and each year she bought Christmas gifts for needy families. She was a remarkable, generous woman who found joy in sharing her gifts. The medical writing and editing community—and the world—is richer for having had Lori in it.

—**Cyndy Kryder, MS, MWC**, AMWA President 2018–2019

Lori would laugh at me for starting this with a quote from the Dalai Lama, but it seems so true to her and her legacy: "Just as ripples spread out when a single pebble is dropped into water, the actions of individuals can have far-reaching effects." — Dalai Lama XIV

This tribute to Lori reflects the effect of her life on us. Obviously as her wife, friend, and collaborator, Lori's effect on me is profound.

Lori first turned my head in the late 1990s when she synthesized a complicated abstract into clear, understandable English. She was one of those rare people who can flow from copyediting to structural editing to document design and



Lori Alexander with Susan Krug, Brian Bass, and Cynthia L. Kryder

back. Her elegant tables, nonredundant prose, and realistic timelines brought rigor and simplicity to work and life that was often messy and complicated.

Lori understood firsthand the need to integrate proven research results into patient care. Two of her siblings were allied health professionals and her mother did triage admitting work at a local emergency room. Like me, her passion at its core was writing. She wrote television screenplays in her 20s, had an agent who brought her promising close calls, and lived with a cat named Malibu. But Hollywood was not meant to be for Lori, which was our gain in the field of medical communication.

Lori and I are essentially the same age, 2 months apart, and we are Boston girls; we experienced the transition from paper to computers in medical literature in parallel time. In the 80s you would have found each of us wandering the stacks of the Harvard Medical Library several days a month, checking references for our respective journals. We ate at the same Lebanese-American food truck, went to the Harvard Coop for supplies, and drove up and down Storrow Drive to and from our respective homes.

Flash forward 10 years later and Lori and I finally are working together and soon thereafter, become a couple after studiously not dating for a year as professional colleagues. We loved each other that much. By this time, I had joined AMWA. I attended my first meeting in 1987 in Boston and was hooked. I took to heart that to make medical writing a profession, you have to treat it as a profession. Lori joined in the 90s, and, similar to her approach to everything she enjoyed and thought important, she was all in. And she had the skills, the vision, the camaraderie, and the humor to take us all along with her.

Flash forward to the future—which was Lori’s specialty as a leader—she was committed to creating and delivering AMWA programs to meet the needs of medical communicators tomorrow as well as today.

Lori was a builder—of sentences, articles, daily meeting newspapers, departments, your member magazine, her own business, a life of travel, and community including the AMWA community. She was a family woman and loved to see the world firsthand. She had actionable bucket lists. She took risks and had managerial courage. She was a powerful example of what you can do when you share your strengths with others.

Lori would want all of you to be successful, to make a difference, and to have fun doing it. For a small person, Lori had huge footsteps and an even bigger heart. We all stand on her shoulders as we face the future without her.

—**Deb Whippen**, AMWA Board of Directors 2012–2014,
Editor and Publisher, Editorial Rx, Inc.



Deb Whippen and Lori Alexander

Those reading these words know that AMWA’s mission is to promote excellence in medical communication and to provide educational resources in support of that goal. I have never known a person who exemplifies that mission more than Lori Alexander. Rather than talk about what Lori accomplished, I’d like to reflect on why and how I think she was able to achieve so much.

Lori had a deep love of language. Not just words but all aspects: how words fit together, the structure of a paragraph, the nuance of verb tenses, how punctuation enhances clarity—don’t misuse a colon! Seriously. Lori’s love of language wasn’t based on a love of rules, being the smartest person in the room (even when she was), or detail obsession. It was

grounded in shaping communication so that the intended recipient could receive the best understanding, period. Whether writing or editing, every detail of every communication was under scrutiny. Lori left no stone unturned to deliver her aim.

And that brings me to the second part, the real magic of her work. That’s Lori’s love of her fellow person. Lori devoted both her career and her personal life to the pursuits that would bring the greatest benefit to others. I think this is why she and Deb had such a perfect partnership—kindred spirits in the kindness and wisdom of their hearts.

It pleases me to know that truly, it is Lori’s work in the field of medical communication—through her legacy of mentees and the improvements she has made in the field—that will help future physicians and patients learn how to adapt to the advancements that are coming in care for brain tumors, other cancers, and other diseases. As a cancer survivor and a professional working in the field of medical education, I will continue to be inspired by my colleague and friend, and I know that is true of countless others.

—**Lisa Greaves**, Division Director, Educational Meetings
at American Society of Clinical Oncology

I still remember that first conversation I had with Lori Alexander in the early aughts roughly 20 years ago. She was interviewing as a candidate for editor of the *AMWA Journal* and I was leading the search committee. As impressive as Lori’s experience and qualifications were on paper, meeting her by telephone that first time we spoke was unforgettable. Lori was sharp, creative, innovative, and enthusiastic—not only about the journal, but about the medical communication profession itself. She embodied the collaborative spirit of AMWA so completely that it was easy to get lost in all the ideas she proposed and directions she envisioned. However, it was her solitary strength and depth of purpose that kept you grounded and focused.

Lori went on to lead the journal to unprecedented heights, and she continued her leadership and service to AMWA well beyond her 10 year editorial tenure. I always enjoyed hearing her speak, whether giving workshops or attending committee and board meetings. Lori had the knack to bring people and ideas together, interwoven with the spark of creativity and a genuineness of mutual care and appreciation. Lori left us far too soon. She made an indelible impression on me, both as a friend and a colleague in the organization we all love and support.

—**Tom Gegeny, MS, ELS, MWC, CMPP**
AMWA President 2009–2010

Lori gave me the big break I needed when I was beginning my freelance graphic design and medical illustration business. Early in my career, my work consisted of mostly small jobs with medical organizations in Boston. I met Deb and Lori while they were both working at the Boston area office of ASCO, a global oncology organization, in the late 1990s. I really wanted to take on larger publication projects and Lori offered me the opportunity to be the designer on the quarterly *ASCO News* publication. We worked well together, and with her recommendation and support, I went on to do many other ASCO publications, print collateral, and conference work, which was a huge boost to my career. When Lori became Editor for the *AMWA Journal* in 2003, she once again offered me a fantastic opportunity. That began my wonderful relationship with AMWA, which has continued to the present. Our close work together on many types of projects continued when she and Deb started Editorial Rx.

Professionally, I was awed by her skills at planning, organizing, and executing projects. She had a strong vision for the *AMWA Journal* and we worked together with the leadership on a redesign. Her attention to detail as an editor was top of the line and I learned so much from her. I am so grateful to have had Lori in my professional life, but after working so closely together for so many years, we also became great friends, always sharing with each other what was happening in our lives day to day.

Personally, I admired what a beautiful adventurous person she was—always planning out her next bucket-list trip. She was warm and welcoming and had a wicked sense of humor. She loved to decorate for every holiday, which I loved to kid her about. I will miss her so much, but know she positively impacted not only my life but many others.

—Amy Boches, graphic designer, *AMWA Journal*



Lori receiving an award in 2012 for 10 years as Editor of the *AMWA Journal*.

Lori Alexander was one of a kind and in many ways her contributions to AMWA and the field of medical writing were immeasurable. She was never one to brag, or even talk about, her accomplishments. She just went about doing her job and finding ways to contribute her time and her wonderfully creative ideas, wherever needed.

I had been an AMWA member for more than 10 years before I met Lori, and it wasn't at AMWA. I met her when, at the suggestion of a fellow AMWA member, she offered me a freelance job working at the ASCO annual meeting as a reporter for the daily newspaper that they published during the meeting. It didn't take long for me to see what a consummate professional Lori was. Working for the *ASCO Daily News* was one of the most challenging and fulfilling freelance jobs I ever had; and when Lori asked me back the next year, and the next, and the next, I knew I had finally made it as a freelance medical writer.

I couldn't have been happier when I learned that Lori had accepted the position as Editor of the *AMWA Journal*. Based on my experience working with her at the ASCO Conferences, I knew that AMWA was about to benefit in ways we couldn't imagine. And we did...

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to both work for Lori—through ASCO and her business, Editorial Rx, Inc.—and with Lori on the *AMWA Journal* and many of the projects she chaired. I could never say “no” to my dear friend Lori, and every time we worked together, I learned something new. Lori Alexander made me a better medical writer, and her many contributions to the field of medical writing and AMWA are truly immeasurable.

—Donna Miceli, DLM Writing Services, Retired
Freelance Writer, Editor & PR Consultant

Lori was the consummate penguin fan. She loved everything about them. It was a highlight of her life to travel to Antarctica to see them in their natural habitat. But I'll get back to that in a moment.

The Swanberg Award is such a fitting tribute to Lori in recognition of her amazing career and innumerable accomplishments. Like Dr Swanberg, Lori was also a transformational leader of AMWA. There was no role Lori held that didn't result in major change for the better. Lori brought skill, expertise, and, importantly, a talent for uniting others to the table.

There is a picture of Lori in the photo gallery of her Facebook page in which she's sporting a mask that says, “Less me and more we.” That singlehandedly describes Lori's leadership. Ever self-effacing, she truly looked for ways to build bridges with others and to generate such enthusiasm for an initiative that many already-very-busy

people willingly jumped in to give of their time and talents. Lori allowed people to be at their best—to offer their best ideas and their best work.

And, like her beloved penguins, she overlooked difficulties and instead focused on what could be achieved, not on what couldn't. You see, penguins don't spend time worrying about not being able to fly, but they are excellent swimmers and effortlessly fly through the water. And one species uses the sun to navigate from land to sea, adjusting for the sun's changing position in the sky throughout the day. In all these ways, penguins have adapted to the challenges their environment poses. Lori did the same, but she also mobilized our profession to move in new and even better directions. Lori set an incredible example for others, and she did so with a fair dose of good humor. I can't think of anyone more deserving of AMWA's highest honor.

—**Melanie Fridl Ross, MSJ, ELS**, AMWA President 2010-2011



Lori and Scooter.

I was fortunate to meet Lori early in her AMWA career. She told me that she wanted to get more involved in AMWA and *that* she did. Once Lori set her mind to something, nothing stopped her—thus her lengthy list of AMWA accomplishments. She had an affinity for education, and her contributions to AMWA's education program, in my opinion, will never be equaled and will live on through the many medical writers she influenced.

I worked with her on multiple education initiatives, including the Certification Commission, in which she made major contributions as a subject-matter expert, including in item development. Lori always said “yes” whenever someone asked her to help. When she became the AMWA Education Director, for the first time, we had someone at headquarters who was an actual medical writer and who readily understood members' needs. Lori charted a new course to expand AMWA's educational offerings. Her legacy to that program will continue, and we members will continue to be the beneficiaries.

When I think of Lori, I hear her infectious laugh and remember her stories. Lori always had a story. In her work-

shop on classical rhetoric, she promoted the use of stories in scientific publications. That workshop caused me to rethink scientific writing, and I teach her philosophy to my students. Lori said, “A story engages you. It taps into your imagination. It connects you with others. Medical writing lacks stories.” She was correct, of course, and gave us simple guidelines for adding story to manuscripts—if only by just switching to first person or giving patients a voice.

When I think of Lori, I also hear her say, “If you have a minute, I'd like to run this idea I have by you.” That was the hook, and I was always honored to be part of Team Lori for whatever new idea she envisioned. Lori often said how grateful she was for the opportunities AMWA gave her to help do her job better, to network with colleagues, and to grow as a leader. What Lori gave back, however, was legion. If every medical writer who benefited from Lori's wisdom planted a seed in her memory, a vast wilderness of flowers would be the result.

The Nobel Laureate Anatole France said, “To accomplish great things, we must dream as well as act.” Lori did both, and she will be greatly missed...

—**Marianne Mallia, ELS, MWC**, AMWA President 2002-2003, 2010
AMWA Swanberg Award Recipient

In an organization with more than its share of brilliant, talented, and generous members, Lori quite simply was a rockstar. Her commitment and passion for the mission of AMWA were unrivaled. Her imprint will be lasting.

—**Victoria White**, Former Editor-in-Chief, *AMWA Journal*

I have long felt that Lori was a natural choice to receive the Swanberg Award. Anytime AMWA is mentioned, it is Lori who pops into my mind. You would be hard-pressed to find another member who has devoted more time and energy to helping AMWA live up to its mission.

I first met Lori when I was at a crossroads in my professional life. I had just left industry and entered the freelance life. At the 2011 AMWA Conference in Jacksonville, I met Deb Whippen and she immediately got me involved in AMWA Florida and turned me over to Lori who realized she had some “fresh volunteer material” to develop. She wasted no time talking me into volunteering on my first of many “Lori-run projects.” Lori was the mentor I had no idea I had always been searching for, but I am just happy I realized what I gift the universe had presented me when I needed it most.

A project or team led by Lori was sure to accomplish its goals and it was always rewarding to be a part of them. Lori led with kindness and was always inclusive long before it

was in vogue. She had a knack for taking you out of your comfort zone and getting you involved in areas that didn't just get the job done for the organization, but left you rewarded with new skills for future use. You wanted to do more because she inspired you with all the confidence you needed to get the job done.

Lori was a naturally curious soul with a thirst for learning and a drive for teaching and sharing what she knew. She was passionate about storytelling as a vehicle for medical communication and as the master communicator, she was every bit the skilled listener as she was the gifted storyteller.

It was always exciting to get one of those calls, "Hi Larry, this is what we are thinking about doing, and I think you would be a great fit." I am grateful for each of those experiences. Lori did a solid for our founder and award namesake, Harold Swanberg. We are so lucky for the legacy Lori has left for us as a guide for the next leg of the AMWA journey.

—**Larry Lynam**, Annual Conference Committee 2012–2018, 2018 President's Award recipient



Lori with her gavel for starting her term as AMWA President 2016-2017.

I can think of no one more deserving to receive the Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award. Lori Alexander's contributions to AMWA vastly exceed the criteria of distinguished contributions to medical communication. I first met Lori while attending an AMWA BOD meeting as a chapter delegate and later, I had the honor of joining the BOD

and serving alongside Lori. I am just one of many that Lori brought into her network, and I am honored.

Lori and I also worked together with UCSD to create and grow an educational program for new medical writers and editors. It leverages the multifaceted expertise of several AMWA members including Yeshi Mikyas, Donna Simcoe, Dikran Toroser, Noelle Demas, and Lynne Friedmann. Since its launch in 2016, the program has continued to expand and grew stronger. Much of its success is attributed to Lori, who in 2017 took a leadership role in the program and served as the program's consulting director. On monthly faculty calls, she pushed each of us to continuously improve our courses, and she was a favorite of the students. Lori brought leadership, grace, and a strong understanding of our field to the program. When she took the position of Education Director at AMWA, Lori ensured that she could continue to serve as the director of the UCSD program, and for that, we are all eternally grateful. The program itself has certified over 50 students. When she stepped away earlier this year, it took 2 folks to fill her shoes. Her presence is and will be missed.

No one could say no when Lori asked, no one. What I recall is her sense of humor. If ever we were sitting next to each other, I knew I would be stifling laughter. I will always be most grateful for her friendship. Her authenticity was rare, and her example will serve as guidance for me and so many others. May we honor her today and always with our work, with our welcoming community, and with authenticity.

—**R. Michelle Sauer Gehring, PhD, ELS**, Instructor, UCSD Extension, AMWA Secretary 2020–2022

I was surprised when Lori Alexander asked me to join the AMWA board during her year as president. I was also nervous and quite honored. I soon learned that Lori had a gift for including others. Many may shy away from inclusion, but Lori embraced it. She always made room for others to contribute in their own way, all while providing support and lighting the path.

I also learned that Lori was highly productive on her own. She literally performed the work of many and made it look easy. I think this combination—including others and high productivity—is what allowed her to accomplish so much.

I was able to witness Lori's craft up close, and I was astonished by her drive, compassion, and commitment to medical writing. She truly loved what she did, and this made work feel like play.

AMWA is blessed to have had Lori leading on multiple fronts over the years, from the *AMWA Journal* to conference planning and education initiatives, to name a few.

Undoubtedly, her departure leaves a void that cannot be easily filled, but her leadership is an inspiration that endures.

It's truly fitting for Lori to be honored with AMWA's highest award. Lori, thank you for being a wonderful mentor and friend. Although you are greatly missed, it lightens my heart to think that you are spending time with penguins.

—**Theresa Singleton, PhD**, AMWA Board of Directors 2016–2019

I first “met” Lori when she emailed me in 2016 suggesting I submit an interest form for the AMWA Executive Committee (EC) as she was starting her AMWA Presidency. The email ended with the postscript: “I noticed on your LinkedIn profile that you’re looking for an opportunity to join a nonprofit board—I hope AMWA fits that!”—which I now know is so Lori. I first met her in person in an elevator. I was so nervous, because she was and always will be a giant in our field (those who know us might chuckle, I’m almost a foot taller than Lori). But Lori was so genuine, warm, and caring that I quickly felt comfortable, and it wasn’t soon after that we became friends. Just last week I found a card from a gift she gave my daughter who had a brain tumor in 2018—tears came to my eyes but smiles also came to my face. Because she was President when I joined the EC, I’ll always think of her as the model AMWA President; never did I imagine that we’d lose her during my presidency. Lori will be so missed, but she will always be with us.

—**Gail V. Flores, PhD**, AMWA President 2020–2021

I first met Lori years ago when I was a delegate to the AMWA board, and I must say I was instantly comforted by her warmth and inclusiveness. Over the years, I’ve had a chance to work with Lori on several initiatives while she was President of AMWA and later as Education Director. Each experience was not only an opportunity for me to learn something new and to grow my professional expertise, but also gave me the chance to inform others about the role public relations and marketing plays in the field of medical communication. Lori understood that medical communicators work in a variety of settings and across multiple areas. She had the desire to develop educational resources to support members that work in the different niches within medical communication.

When I think of an inclusive and servant leader for AMWA, I think of Lori. We as an organization are now reaping the benefits of Lori’s passion and commitment to

AMWA. I can’t think of anyone more deserving to receive the 2021 Swanberg Award. I am comforted to know that her legacy will live on through AMWA and will inspire many medical communicators along the way.

—**Katrina R. Burton**, AMWA President 2021–2022

Lori was so many things to so many people. To me she was a dear friend, a valued colleague, a trusted leader, a generous resource, a joyful spirit, and a kind heart. But I think there’s one way to sum her up—Lori was an accelerant. She always set my mind on fire with her energy and enthusiasm.

Working with Lori when she was Editor of the *AMWA Journal*, she brought so many innovative ideas to the table. Nothing was impossible. She would light a match with a simple thought or suggestion that would ignite collaboration as it spread across the room. During her AMWA presidency, Lori fused the organization together behind a new governance structure that strengthened AMWA while bringing it into compliance with evolving guidelines. As Director of Education, Lori’s passion for teaching others fueled an explosion of new educational products and programs that will continue to serve AMWA and the medical writing profession for years to come.

Receiving the 2021 Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award for Lori’s contributions to the medical communication profession is a great and well-deserved honor. The honor of knowing Lori, working with her, and learning from her, is all ours.

—**Brian Bass, MWC**, AMWA President 2013–2014, 2017 AMWA Swanberg Award Recipient



Lori teaching at the 2018 AMWA Medical Writing & Communication Conference.