

**Larissa Gerstel**  
(April 3, 1979 - April 14, 2005)



Larissa's Classroom, Pierson Elementary School, 2001

**Tributes to the Life and Work of a  
Dedicated Teacher & Parenting Advocate**



## Larissa Gerstel

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Although she was just 26 years old when she passed away, Larissa Gerstel's accomplishments were numerous and inspiring to those who loved her and to those who were impacted by her work and her caring.

Larissa was a happy, talented and expressive person, a spontaneous and beautiful soul, and a dedicated teacher and friend. An extremely compassionate person, Larissa possessed a most vivacious spirit, solidly grounded in strong beliefs about the value of all human beings. She was an outgoing person who could make friends with anybody, and she did. She possessed an openness to others, affirming who they were and helping them to see and be true to their inner strengths.

The genuineness of Larissa's empathy for people was deep and always in evidence. Larissa Gerstel will be remembered in the hearts of those who loved her for her humor, strength of personality, loving character, and deeds. Larissa's work as a teacher, her specific love of students for whom English is their second language, the legacy of her work on behalf of literacy for all children, and her work to support parenting and promote social equity will endure beyond her life. Larissa is being recognized and honored by three living memorials to her life and work.

### **A Tribute to Larissa: The Larissa Education Fund at Pierson Elementary School**

In gratitude to **Pierson Elementary School** in Pierson, Florida for the happiness and professional growth that Larissa experienced while teaching there for three years (2001-2004), ***The Larissa Gerstel Education Fund*** has been established by **Larissa's family** and the **Governing Board of Pierson Elementary School in Volusia County**. As Larissa wrote to Principal Leticia Roman and Assistant Principal Kate Godbee on April 27, 2004:

I also want to say that as happy as I am to be moving [to Denver], I will be leaving Pierson ES and the entire faculty with a heavy heart. This school has been truly wonderful to me and I want to thank the two of you for always making the time to see me and talk through situations. I have learned so much about what being a good teacher is from being at this school.

Principal Leticia Roman writes:

***The Larissa Gerstel Education Fund*** is being established in accordance with the value that Larissa placed on learning, education, and parental involvement as the key to their children's futures. Monies donated to this Fund will be used to support the students of Pierson Elementary School in achieving English second-language proficiency and the overall literacy needs of families within the community.

Donations will support two important parenting and teaching initiatives: the new ***Pierson's Parenting Center***, which will encompass parent workshops, activities, and literature for parents; and ***Pierson's 100 Book Challenge***, part of the American Reading Company's national program to help encourage, support, and reward student's love of reading. **The Grand Opening of the Center is expected to be held on April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2006, in honor of Larissa's birthday.** Donations will replenish and add books and supplies, and celebrate students' success in the program. **Family and friends who wish to honor Larissa's memory by participating in this worthy cause may contribute to this fund. *Donations should be made out to: Pierson Elementary School/Larissa Gerstel Education Fund, and sent to: Pierson Elementary School, 1 West First Avenue, Pierson, Florida 32180 / Attn: Ms. Leticia Roman and Larissa Gerstel Education Fund.***

After graduating from the **School of Education at American University** in 2000, Larissa began her teaching career at Title 1 Schools in Montgomery County, Maryland. Title 1 Schools are defined as “schools that receive federal funding where at least 40 percent of the children in the school attendance area are from low-income families or at least 40 percent of the student enrollment is from low-income families.” It was at Pierson where Larissa’s love of teaching and her compassion for children of diverse backgrounds compelled her to help her 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders, many of whom were children of Spanish-speaking migrant worker families, become bilingual and learn to enjoy the benefits of attending and participating in their schooling.

Larissa also spoke of how important it is to have parents participate in their children’s education, saying that “the success of a child’s education is due one-third to the teacher/school, one-third to the student’s efforts, and one-third to parental support.” Larissa knew that she could, and she did, make a real difference in the lives and futures of these children and their families. This was why, instead of accepting a position teaching at a local, more affluent school, Larissa choose to drive 55 miles each way to teach at Pierson, where she loved “her kids,” her colleagues, and her supervisors. Larissa treasured her time teaching at Pierson, and this was where she gained confidence in the direction she wanted to go for her future.

### **Two other Tributes honor Larissa’s work and life: American University and the Parenting Coalition International**

In the **Curriculum Resource Room of the American University Library in Washington, D.C.**, a model literacy room for children, parents and student teachers is being built and dedicated as ***The Larissa Gerstel Critical Literacy Collection and Center in the American University Library***. From Sarah Irvine-Belson, Ph.D., Dean of the School of Education at American University:

During her college years, Larissa worked with Dr. Vivian Vasquez as a founding member of student group that became the *Educators for Critical Literacy (ECL)*, a DC Area AU Student Affiliate of the *National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)*. This group worked to reach out to local community organizations to make literacy a central component of children’s lives, specifically, focusing on literacy for social justice and equity. In honor of Larissa’s work and her contributions to these literacy efforts, the School of Education will build and dedicate the ***Larissa Gerstel Critical Literacy Collection & Center in the Curriculum Materials Room in the American University Library***. This center will be created especially for children and will include space and books on multicultural and social equity issues.

***The Larissa Gerstel Critical Literacy Collection and Center*** will be for AU students, staff, faculty and their families, as well as a significant resource for the community, as the local public library has recently been closed. **The Grand Opening of the Center is expected to be held in late April 2006, in honor of Larissa’s birthday.** As the Center is initially being funded and maintained by American University, family and friends will be notified of future fundraising events to support the Center.

Larissa’s focus on the critical role of parents in supporting their children’s education is also being honored by the display and use of a 1912 Clark Melville Grand piano donated by Larissa’s family to **The Parenting Coalition, International**, a non-profit organization set up to honor the importance of parents in their children’s lives and education. A dedication of the piano was held on December 11, 2005 at the AnteQues and Thangz mall in Ft. Washington, Maryland. Music lessons will be held in this storefront location, and now, because the piano is in the front of the store, the piano will be played often, and music heard throughout the building, thereby enlivening and bringing joy to the whole community. Donations to the Parenting Coalition International should be sent to: Belinda Rollins, Parenting Coalition, International, c/o AnteQues & ThangZ, 12788 C Old Fort Road, Fort Washington, MD 20744.

## **Larissa Gerstel**

Larissa (Rozek) Gerstel was born on April 3, 1979 in Hamilton, New York. She passed away on April 14, 2005 in Denver, Colorado. Just 10 days earlier she celebrated her 26th birthday by hiking in the mountains of Denver with her husband, reminiscent of her childhood days in Lucerne, Switzerland. Larissa's love of diversity and her work with children began by her being a child of the world, having spent her childhood living in upstate New York; Zurich, Lucerne and Lugano, Switzerland; Parma, Italy; Miami Beach, Florida; Los Angeles, California; Framingham and Newton in Massachusetts; and McLean, Virginia.

After attending 4th grade in Parma, Italy, Larissa returned to the United States and went directly into 6th grade before attending Junior High School at Brimmer and May in Newton, MA,. Larissa then moved with her family to Virginia,. and attended McLean High School, graduating after three years in 1996. Larissa attended and graduated cum laude from American University in 2000. Larissa Rozek was married to Alexander Gerstel on July 21, 2002 in St. Augustine, Florida, near their home in Port Orange/Daytona Beach, Florida. They moved to Denver in July 2004 so that Alex could start a new career and for Larissa to go to graduate school after establishing residency in Colorado.

Larissa was unaware of the severity of her illness when she fell ill the day after her birthday. She was only aware of the loving care she received and the loving presence of all those who cared for her, when she passed away peacefully from liver failure 10 days later. Larissa is survived by her loving husband Alexander Gerstel, parents Robin and Richard Seitz (Virginia) and Robert Rozek (Vancouver), in-law parents Armando and Annie Gerstel (FL) and Lola and Jose Innis (FL), sister Loree (Virginia), in-law sister and brother Carla Berkowitz (FL) and Henry Gerstel (FL), grandmothers Vida Berkowitz (FL) and Eleanor Seitz (CA), aunts and uncles Sherrill Berk and Jeff Swartz (Virginia), Bonnie Berk and Dennis McLean (WA), Carol and Peter Seitz (CA), Jeffrey and Yolanda Berkowitz (FL), and Richard Berkowitz (FL), and cousins Rachel and Haley Swartz (Virginia), Alex and Noah McLean (Seattle), Eric Seitz and Jamie and Brad Gust (CA), and cousins Taylor and Mareesa Esformes, and Hannah and Louis Berkowitz (FL). She was loved by her grandfathers, Paul Berkowitz (deceased) and Wolfram Seitz (deceased).

Larissa's extended family includes Honey Swartz and Henry D. Swartz (deceased), Marcia and Len Ross, Allison Ross and Lance George, Stacey Ross and Alex Washkowitz, Cynthia Weber Freedman, Lewis Freedman and Sam Freedman, Ruthann and Harvey Cohn, Cecelie and Ralph Gordon, Brent and Annie Redstone, and Keryn and Lauren Redstone. Larissa's family also acknowledges the loving friendship of Larissa's mentor Judy Bott, old friends Brad Hopewell, Elon Etstein, Martijn Hermes, and dear friends Jamie Burgess, Colleen Charles, Alison Dingwall, Sasha Mackin, and Mary Kate Weller.

Larissa was a treasure to all who knew her, including her extended family, teachers and friends from around the world, many of whom came to speak lovingly about her at her funeral at the Shalom Chapel at the Horan & McConaty in Denver, Colorado on April 17, 2005 and the memorial service held in her honor at the Lewinsville Presbyterian Church in McLean, Virginia on June 4, 2005.

## **Larissa Gerstel: In her own words**

Larissa loved helping students learn even in high school, when she became a Spanish tutor and followed the progress of her students for 2 years. She also taught elementary school subjects to Chinese-American children at a local school during her high school years. Larissa followed her love of the world's cultures by attending American University, first as a student of International

Studies and then in the School of Education. After graduating college, Larissa taught 3rd through 5th graders at schools in Montgomery County in Maryland, Pierson Elementary School in Florida, the Pinnacle Charter School in Denver, Colorado. Larissa worked three different jobs during 2004-05: team lead and 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at Pierson, tutoring two evenings a week for ClubZ! Tutoring Service, and rewriting the "Ready to Read" government grant for the Denver County Public Schools. Although she had not yet attended graduate school, this position required her to supervise experienced reading specialists.

After moving to Denver, Larissa was in the process of applying for the Master's Degree Program to become a Bilingual/English-second-language learner Reading Specialist at the University of Colorado at Denver. As Larissa wrote when she quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson at the beginning of her statement of purpose essay "Knowledge exists to be imparted." Larissa's statement in her graduate school application, which she had almost completed at the time of her falling ill, speaks for her:

Having lived most of my childhood in Europe with American-English-speaking parents, I grew up a second language learner. I know the trials and tribulations that individuals, especially children, face when learning new sounds, new cultures, and new ways. This personal experience has shaped me into the person I am today: someone who values multiple perspectives, cultures and languages, and who understands their impact on children's lives.

When I began teaching, I sought out schools with students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds that had high populations of ESOL students. I found I was drawn to teaching students who had similar personal, intercultural and multilingual backgrounds as I had in Switzerland and Italy. Title 1 schools sought me out due to these personal experiences and my fluency in Spanish.

Upon entering the teaching field, I was struck by memories of my own experience of moving from America to Europe with my family. My first memory of wanting to become a teacher was in a small, Catholic school on the outskirts in the country town of Lugano, Switzerland. I could not communicate orally or in writing with my Italian-speaking teacher and therefore was forced to use simple symbols to convey my thoughts. On the first day of school, I could not think of anything else to do but draw little scenes on my lined paper. My teacher, noticing my love of art and my sense of frustration, gently placed an Italian picture dictionary on my desk and gave me a blank journal. She proceeded to draw the first illustration and word. Then she quietly said the word and motioned for me to repeat it back. Her fingertips had barely left the pencil when I reached for it and began to draw the next illustration and word. I sounded out the word and then wrote the English translation. Learning how to speak using phonemes unfamiliar to my mouth, I was immersed in a language that I did not know yet. This is how I came to learn to trust my teacher, my peers, my newfound language, and myself as a language learner.

As a teacher, I have tried to emulate this gracious manner of teaching the English language to Second Language Learners and Limited Language Proficiency students. I taught for 4 years at Title 1 schools before moving to Colorado to give teaching in a charter school a chance. Working in suburban and rural Title 1 schools with high populations of ESOL, LEP and NES students has given me the greatest pleasure because the students showed such tremendous growth when I guided them with kindness and with gentleness.

Having felt the same awkwardness when learning a new language myself, I empathize with these children who have so little but have so much to give. The

look of understanding that comes over a child's face when she or he finally understands a concept that before was baffling and yet now seems simple is the greatest joy I have had as a teacher.

When my two lowest achieving students were awarded the Rotary Club Award in Reading for the State of Florida, it was the highlight of my day because these students were finally being recognized for their academic achievements instead of their academic failures. Thus, my professional experiences have strengthened my love for teaching the bilingual/ESOL population. As an educator, I have always maintained that high expectations lead to a higher intrinsic motivation and yield great results. I believe that this expectation is what has made my students successful in their struggle to learn a language that is often grammatically confusing and difficult.

## Eulogy

As well as loving learning and education, Larissa loved to sing and dance, and was a wonderful artist. She had an innate sense and love of the beautiful, which she could envision and had the talent and passion to create exactly as she saw in her mind. Over the years, Larissa developed her singing and painting skills, and in her high school years also excelled at computer art. But she was too much a people-person to focus on this; instead her students, friends, and family became the recipients of her artistry. Larissa found her true passion in the creation of a beautiful and loving classroom environment for her students.

Larissa's untimely passing has been a wake up call for those who knew and loved her to make every day count, and a reminder to us all that every person is precious, and that each of us can make a real difference in the lives of others. As dear friends have said "it is not the duration of a person's life that is important, but rather the quality of that person's life. Larissa lived and gave more in her 26 years than most people do in 70 or 80 years." Larissa will remain a blessing to all who knew her, and now to all who benefit from these enduring, most honorable memorials.

Now we say, "Larissa, well done. Thank you for gracing our lives with your loving and lively spirit for the last 26 years. You are in our hearts forever, eternally. And your spirit lives on in all those who you continue to inspire, your friends and family, and especially the children you have helped and continue to help through the legacy of your dedication, compassion, and love.

Larissa, we are grateful that we had the opportunity to call you on your birthday and reaffirm how much we love you, for all eternity. So, Larissa, be thou at peace, knowing that you are beloved by all who know you. We know that you are with God, and held in the loving arms of Grandpa Paul and Grandpa Wolf, Puppie Henry, Auntie Frieda, Great-Aunties Anna and Hilda and Uncle Eli, and all the loved ones who went before you.

In Psalm 4, it says: I will lie down in peace and sleep. For you alone, oh Lord, make me dwell in safety.

In Psalm 23, it says: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives. And we shall all dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

May you all also be at peace knowing that Larissa is at peace."