The power to question: 
A tribute to Dr. Nina S. Roberts, 1960–2022

The world needs more compassion, kindness, and love. And we must never forget to challenge, question, and stay curious. The power to question is the basis of human progress.

NINA S. ROBERTS
When the George Wright Society and the UC Berkeley Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity decided in 2019 to team up and launch Parks Stewardship Forum, one of the early decisions was to identify a new columnist to debut in the inaugural issue. We quickly agreed that that person should be Nina Roberts. Nina was well known to both organizations. She contributed to PSF’s predecessor, The George Wright Forum, and attended several GWS Conferences, and also worked with the founding executive director of the Institute. She was also well regarded in the academic world and around the San Francisco Bay Area for, among other things, her commitment to JEDI: justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

So we were delighted when she accepted our invitation to conduct a regular column in the journal’s pages. We asked Nina to come up with a name for it, and, after some reflection, she dubbed her new column “Coloring Outside the Lines.” If ever there were an editorial column title that succinctly captured the essence of its author, “Coloring Outside the Lines” as authored by Nina S. Roberts, PhD, is it. A faculty member at San Francisco State University, Dr. Nina, as she was affectionately known, spent her whole conservation career (and, to judge from the obituary provided by her family, more or less her whole life) pushing beyond the bounds of convention.

Nina was just getting the column underway when she received a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer—widely regarded as one of the deadliest forms of the disease. In the face of this devastating news, Dr. Nina did what she always did: drove forward, fueled by a fierce optimism that, against all odds, persisted right up until the time of her death on March 29, 2022. The last photo her family shared online showed her smiling broadly, lighting up the hospice. Even though she was about to die, she looked like the happiest person on earth, surrounded by loved ones.

Dr. Nina completed seven installments of “Coloring Outside the Lines.” Each one is linked below.

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The body of work Nina contributed to our collective understanding through “Coloring Outside the Lines” is significant. A couple of her columns were co-authored; all of them looked at JEDI from different perspectives. As Nina herself explained it:

Why is “Coloring Outside the Lines” the title of my column in this journal? In the end, it is all about changing the narrative. Coloring Outside the Lines leads me to further action about engaging communities of color outdoors and into the natural world—for those who have not had such experiences, that is. I didn’t say “start engaging” because people of color have been immersed in the outdoors/nature for centuries. From living outdoors, working in nature and fearing the woods, to playing, exploring, and loving nature (and more), people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds have been doing it. We are out there; always have been. For me, this also leads back to a discussion of social permission as well as addressing structural barriers. This column title speaks to innovation coupled with communities of color and arbitrary “lines.” We must expand the conversation.

Whether it was advocating for equitable access to recreational opportunities, making sure unsung pioneers got their due, or celebrating the simple joy of being in nature, she did it with insight and panache. Or, as one colleague put it, “Dr. Nina changed the lives of countless people through her social justice badassery.”

The world does indeed need more compassion, kindness, love, and abiding curiosity. Dr. Nina S. Roberts brought all of that and more. And she was not afraid to share directives in a friendly but forceful way. As she was fond of saying: “Get outside, visit a local park, and reflect on nature’s beauty and how we can increase access to our parks.”

We encourage all of us to go back and read her “Coloring Outside the Lines” columns (linked above) and rededicate ourselves to the principles of JEDI in honor of Dr. Nina.

In addition to her mother, she leaves behind her two sisters, her brother, and their families, and a loving extended family of numerous cousins, aunts, and uncles. A celebration of Nina’s life was held in June by the university. For those inclined, contributions may be made to the Dr. Nina Roberts Memorial Scholarship fund at https://give.sfsu.edu/roberts.
Parks Stewardship Forum explores innovative thinking and offers enduring perspectives on critical issues of place-based heritage management and stewardship. Interdisciplinary in nature, the journal gathers insights from all fields related to parks, protected/conserved areas, cultural sites, and other place-based forms of conservation. The scope of the journal is international. It is dedicated to the legacy of George Meléndez Wright, a graduate of UC Berkeley and pioneer in conservation of national parks.

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