

Blending science and art was at the 'core' of Minou Modabber's life



With a partial lunar eclipse on August 7, 2017, amateur astronomers and nature lovers saw the chance to observe an exciting moment in nature. Minou Modabber, then director of the Medical Arts Core at Dana-Farber, saw an opportunity.

Pointing her iPhone out a window of her Newport, Vermont, vacation home, Modabber clicked again and again – capturing the eclipse at

different points and angles. She then downloaded the photos and modified them using programs like Illustrator and Photoshop, creating images with varying degrees of light that could be easily manipulated to resemble cells or other scientific elements.

Such was the magic of Modabber, who died of a fast-spreading metastatic anaplastic thyroid carcinoma on Sept. 2 – five months and one day after retiring from a 39-year career at Dana-Farber. The Brookline resident was 82.

During her tenure here, Modabber combined the skills and creative eye of the professional artist with a working knowledge of science to help investigators with research papers, posters, PowerPoint presentations, and an array of other projects. Everyone from undergraduate students to senior faculty at Dana-Farber regularly sought Modabber out, knowing they would get a heavy dose of her headstrong personality along with a beautifully crafted final product.

“Minou was a perfectionist with very strong views on how things should look artistically,” says Dana-Farber President/CEO Emeritus Edward J. Benz Jr., MD, who used Modabber’s



Modabber with her daughter, Yalda.



Modabber with her grandsons, Manu and Kian.

images (known as figures) many times, including in a textbook on anemia he recently edited. “She really understood the science, and what you were trying to get across, better than most people.”

Modabber took a well-traveled path to Dana-Farber. Born Minou Bayat in Egypt, to Iranian parents, she earned a full scholarship to the Academy of Art in Rome. There, she studied set design and art history, and later worked as a drafter at an architectural firm.

Moving to Los Angeles to be closer to her twin sister, Mangol Bayat, she married immunologist Farrokh Modabber, PhD, and

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— Katie Ward

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— Ellis Reinherz, MD

moved to Brookline in 1969 for his postdoc years at the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH). They had a daughter, Yalda, a year later, and relocated again – this time to Tehran – in 1974.

Minou, who spoke six languages, worked there as an artist and a translator, but the family lost everything in the 1979 Iranian revolution. She and her husband separated, and she returned to Brookline as a single mother.

After a brief stint as an administrative assistant at HSPH, Modabber was hired by Dana-Farber in 1980 to run its growing Medical Arts department.

Ellis Reinherz, MD, chief of the Laboratory Immunobiology, quickly became a frequent collaborator. In addition to helping him with figures for many journal papers, Modabber created all the posters for a major research symposium he hosted in Boston – images that he says allowed her to more fully utilize her artistic gifts.

“It was clear that she was as passionate about what she was doing as I was about what I was doing,” says Reinherz. “The thing about Minou was that in addition to being artistic, she was also very logical and focused. She had a fantastic moral compass and work ethic.”

She was also, according to Reinherz, a terrific cook.

“When Minou learned I loved to eat, she invited me over to her home for wonderful Persian food,” Reinherz recalls. “We became good friends, and I also got to know her daughter Yalda, who wound up working as a volunteer in my lab while at Brookline High School, and during college as well.”

As the years passed, scientists seeking figures to represent their research had more options open to them through digital cameras and computers. Modabber changed with the times. She created the Medical Arts Core Web Library, a free, online resource for researchers to download templates, illustrations,



Modabber (center) with Edward J. Benz, Jr. (left) and Gary Countryman, of the Board of Trustees, at the 2006 Service Awards.

and images from nature (including her eclipse photos) to use in papers, posters, and presentations.

“Minou always wanted to ensure she added value to the research community,” says Michelle Cox, vice president of Research Administration. “She saw the web library as just that and focused her efforts to create this useful tool, and those images are her legacy.”

Katie Ward, HR business partner, adds that the web library is “a testament to her dedication to the research community, the Dana-Farber mission, and her desire to do all she could to make the lives of researchers easier. She always wanted to teach people new things.”

In addition to her daughter Yalda, Modabber is survived by her son-in-law Matthew Stromberg and her two beloved grandsons, Kian (15) and Manu (12). Although she was a very strict mother, her daughter jokes, as a grandmother Modabber thought nothing of announcing to her grandsons 10 minutes before dinner, “OK, let’s go get some ice cream!”

She should also, says Benz, be credited for helping lead a movement at Dana-Farber in recent decades.

“Our ability to communicate science within the profession, but particularly beyond the profession – to lay audiences, to our trustees, and to the communities that were coming to us for care – got better and better as time went on.

Minou was a very important part of that.”

— by Saul Wisnia

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Colleagues reflect on Minou

“ Minou was an incredible person. She was a perfectionist and was so proud of her family but never failed to ask me about mine. We met many times in the kitchen and talked about her beautiful home in Vermont and I could see her there for many years when she retired. I am so sorry to hear she didn't get to do that. Rest in peace lovely lady, you will be missed. ”

 **Joellen Fredericks** 9/18/2019 8:48:45 PM

“ Wow! I cannot believe she has passed away. She was indeed the most pleasant, warm, and structured person I know. Our meetings were mostly for me to collect posters she worked on, but would end up being a time for her to share words of wisdom and tea! She will be missed. May she rest in peace. ”

 **Judy** 9/18/2019 9:43:51 AM


“ I loved Minou's passion. It was contagious. Shalom. ”

 **Lisa** 9/18/2019 9:23:16 AM


“ Minou had a deep respect for the research community here at Dana-Farber, and her first priority was always to protect the researchers' best interests. She was passionate about her career, and without a doubt, she had the special sauce. She will be missed. ”

 **Rachel_1** 9/17/2019 3:04:25 PM

“ What a beautiful piece about Minou and her life. She was a special person and I am grateful for the chance to have known and worked with her. May her memory be for a blessing. ”

 **Deborah Toffler** 9/17/2019 1:00:29 PM

“ Very sorry to hear about this. I worked closely with Minou quite a bit and I can't believe she's gone. The American dream, at least as it was sold to me, is that we all have a chance to work hard to make a better life for us and our family, and retire with time to enjoy that life that we've built. News like this gives me pause, and makes me realize that there is no guarantee of that time after retirement, and that I should make sure I build it into my every day. RIP Minou :(”

 **Richard Oakley** 9/17/2019 12:23:23 PM

“ Minou was one of a kind, for sure! She was so incredibly kind and thoughtful and funny! She was also very generous with her time and craft. I will miss her and will cherish the many memories of our paper cost discussions that took place everywhere, including the ladies room! :) We will miss you, Minou. ”

 **Erica Woulf** 9/17/2019 10:24:25 AM


“ Minou tough yes, but such an interesting woman, I would both be leery and anticipate our meetings together. We early on had connection. She was a compelling woman who wouldn't except no as the final word. Your constant presence will be missed actually already missed. Cindy ”

 **Cynthia_3** 9/17/2019 9:48:42 AM


“ Minou was a tour de force at Overland Street! Not sure I ever met anyone quite like her. Unforgettable comes to mind. She was so dedicated to Dana-Farber's mission and so proud of the Medical Arts Core. I miss our conversations and web traffic counts for her site! Rest in Peace my friend. ”

 **David Beksha** 9/17/2019 9:36:58 AM

“ Such a wonderful and talented woman who will be missed by so many. Deb Hicks ”

 **Deborah Hicks** 9/17/2019 8:43:28 AM

“ May she rest in peace. Amen ”

 **Fatma Jiddawi** 9/17/2019 7:48:28 AM

“ Minou was a pleasure to know. I helped her out in Facilities when she needed our staff to install and remove her lightboxes. She was a most interesting person to talk to with wide knowledge. We had great conversations and laughed a lot. ”

 **Lory Zimbalatti** 9/17/2019 7:11:31 AM

“ I worked with Minou frequently for the past 11 years. I'm very sorry to hear of her passing. May she rest in peace... ”

 **Claudia Steele-O'Sullivan** 9/16/2019 4:35:07 PM