

# In Memoriam: Bernadette Hoppe, Esq.

Jerry Ballas, MD, MPH

*The National Perinatal Association (NPA) is an interdisciplinary organization that strives to be a leading voice for perinatal care in the United States. Our diverse membership is comprised of healthcare providers, parents & caregivers, educators, and service providers, all driven by their desire to give voice to and support babies and families at risk across the country.*

*Members of the NPA write a regular peer-reviewed column in Neonatology Today.*



Bernadette Hoppe was already a legend by the time I joined the Board of Directors of the National Perinatal Association in 2013. I was a newly minted Maternal-Fetal Medicine specialist when I received the invite from Susan Altman, midwife extraordinaire and one of my former teachers during my OB/GYN residency at SUNY Stony Brook. I was flattered that Susan would think of me for this position, and even though I knew very little about NPA, I jumped at the opportunity.

I attended my first official NPA Board meeting in January of 2014 and immediately felt like a fish out of water. Bernadette, I would come to learn, had been elected to a two-year term as President of NPA, but had to take time off due to a new diagnosis of colon cancer. I barely knew anyone on the Board at that point, but I could tell they were still reeling from the news. Despite this diagnosis and her first round of treatment, Bernadette still managed to participate by phone. And by participate, I mean

she created the kind of presence through thoughtful commentary and well-timed humor that I could only dream of emulating in-person, let alone remotely. She exuded an enthusiasm for NPA's mission that was infectious, and I was hooked. To that point in my young academic career, I had siloed myself comfortably within the world of OB/GYN and MFM, looking at issues facing pregnant women through a clinical lens of randomized trials, expert opinion, and, quite frankly, what had been driven into me by those who trained me in residency and fellowship. Suddenly, I found myself amongst a passionate group of midwives, nurses, pediatricians, social workers, parent advocates, lawyers, nutritionists and psychologists who were looking at the very same perinatal issues I thought I had cornered clinically though lenses I barely knew existed. To be honest, within the first few hours of that meeting, I was questioning if I was the right person for this organization.

Then Bernadette turned to me (virtually, of course, since she was on the conference line) and asked if I'd be interested in looking over NPA's draft paper addressing Maternal Mortality in the United States. She explained how it could benefit from my input as an MFM and improve the document's multidisciplinary credentials. I was suddenly at ease. Not only was this a topic I felt comfortable with clinically, but it was a position paper written from a social justice point of view that I rarely considered in the past. Looking back now, I realize that beyond simply connecting a specialty with a task, Bernadette had exhibited one of the greatest qualities of a leader: assessing a team member's strength and setting them on a course for success.

From that point on, despite our limited face-to-face interactions, Bernadette's influence over my path within NPA would only grow. I would finally meet her in person a few months later at our annual meeting in St. Louis. She would not let the rollercoaster of her cancer treatment slow her down. I found the presence I had felt by phone a few months prior paled in comparison to the woman I met in person. She was fierce in a way only Bernadette could be, with an eye for detail and razor-sharp wit honed from her years as a liti-

gator combined with a sense of justice for women that was as unyielding as she was in the face of cancer. As native New Yorkers, we clicked on a level that I felt privileged to share.

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Over the next five years, Bernadette would encounter painful bouts of chemotherapy and treatment setbacks and still produce the kind of timely, high-level work most would struggle to produce without such adversity. She kept NPA abreast of important amicus briefs, advanced and modernized our organization's stance on substance use disorders in pregnancy and, during one of the most difficult points in her life, created an amazing module entitled “Opiates in Pregnancy: Using Science in Family Court Matters” to serve as a practical (and factual) reference for providers to fairly treat this vulnerable and often-maligned patient population. On a personal note, during this time, Bernadette would contact periodically to gauge my interest in one day taking on a leadership position within NPA, offering not only advice and encouragement, but giving me a glimpse of the future she envisioned for the organization.

This past January, with the confidence instilled in me over the years by Bernadette, I took on the position of President of NPA. At our first Board Meeting of the year, one of the most pressing orders of business was extending the position of Emeritus Board Member to Bernadette. Needless to say, it was passed enthusiastically. In responding to our nomination, Bernadette



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replied: "Thank you very much for the honor of being selected for an emeritus member of the board of directors of NPA. I accept this nomination with enthusiasm and gratitude. Because of my current health status, I will not be able to attend the board meeting in person. However, I am happy to attend via electronic means."

***"For the rest of us, whose lives she touched through her storied career in family law, her fierce advocacy on behalf of those who had no voice and her unwavering sense of humor in the face of insurmountable odds, we will continue to honor Bernadette through the kind of deeds and calls to action she fearlessly championed regardless of the odds. "***

Ten days later, she would pass away peacefully surrounded by those she loved. She is survived, first and foremost, by her wife Mary, who stood by her in a way only true love could endure. For the rest of us, whose lives she touched through her storied career in family law, her fierce advocacy on behalf of those who had no voice and her unwavering sense of humor in the face of insurmountable odds, we will continue to honor Bernadette through the kind of deeds and calls to action she fearlessly championed

regardless of the odds. If we can do this as providers for women, newborns, and their families, then we can finally be the agents of change Bernadette strove to be every day of her life.

Jerry Ballas, MD, MPH

President, National Perinatal Association

Associate Professor, Maternal-Fetal Medicine

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To learn more about Bernadette and her passion for advocacy, follow these links:

- [Buffalo Law Journal: Right to die is personal for Buffalo attorney](#)
- [Hoppe & Associates](#)
- [NPA Position Paper on Substance Use Disorder in Pregnancy](#)

Corresponding Author



Jerry Ballas, MD, MPH  
President,  
National Perinatal Association  
Associate Professor, Maternal-Fetal Medicine  
University of California, San Diego  
[Jerry Ballas <jerry.ballas@nationalperinatal.org>](mailto:jerry.ballas@nationalperinatal.org)

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**Editor's Note:**  
*I was privileged to know Bernadette. She was always absolutely committed to the causes that were most important to her. She never wavered and never let anything get in the way of her boundless altruism. I am so proud of the NPA in advancing Bernadette to emeritus status. Although she was only in this role for a short time, as an emeritus, I can think of no other individual who was more deserving and whose selection would further enhance and elevate the meaning of emeritus status. May her motivation and commitment be remembered and serve as an example to all of us of how we can better ourselves.*  
  
Respectfully,  
  
Mitchell Goldstein, MD  
Past President and Emeritus Board  
National Perinatal Association



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