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### Sandra Risa Leiblum, Ph.D., Sexology's Renaissance Woman

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## TRIBUTE ESSAY

# Sandra Risa Leiblum, Ph.D., Sexology's Renaissance Woman

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*Before her death on January 28, 2010, Sandra Risa Leiblum, Ph.D., touched countless lives through her work as a private practice psychologist, author, sexologist, and professor. This essay describes some of Leiblum's accomplishments and incorporates personal reminiscences by the author and several of Leiblum's colleagues.*

**KEYWORDS** *Sandra Leiblum, sex therapy, sex research*

Within the relatively small arena of sexology, ideas flow among members of diverse disciplines, and the connections made among new and experienced sexologists enable the field to evolve. Few people make as many connections or share as much information as did Sandra Risa Leiblum, Ph.D., during her life and career. Before her death on January 28, 2010, she touched countless lives through her work as a private practice psychologist, author, sexologist, and professor.

Sandy and I lived in neighboring towns and knew some of the same people, yet I first became aware of her work during a sexual dysfunctions course at Widener University. Required reading included *Principles and Practice of Sex Therapy* (2000), the gold-standard textbook for sexual and relationship therapy that Sandy co-authored with Raymond Rosen.

The professor for that course was William Stayton, MDiv, ThD, Ph.D., who described Sandy as a long-time friend, teacher, and colleague. He recalled:

“For many years, she had me speak during Sex Week at UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, and she always was warm in her greeting and introduction. *Principles and Practice of Sex Therapy* will continue to be an important text in training sexuality educators and therapists. I still

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use it with my students at Morehouse School of Medicine as well as at Widener University.”

The Society for Sex Therapy and Research honored the fourth edition of the book, which Sandy edited herself, with the 2010 Health Professional Book Award. The book is used by therapists, counselors, and educators outside the classroom because of the breadth of its content and readability. Eric M. Garrison, MAEd, MSc, DLSHTM, CSC, ACS, considered the book indispensable. He said:

“As a minimalist who eschews function over form, I had but four books on my Manhattan desk: a dictionary, a thesaurus, a book of quotations, and Sandy’s *Principles and Practice of Sex Therapy*. Her writing brought life to the material, which was based in scientific research and confirmed by anecdotes and her own personal experiences as a sex therapist.”

Sexuality educator Konstance McCaffree, Ph.D., CSE, CFLE, now serving as president-elect for the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, said, “Sandra’s book was my bible, as I had no formal instruction in therapy and yet as a sexuality professional, I was often asked to give information about it.”

The most-recent book Sandy edited, *The Treatment of Sexual Desire Disorders: A Clinical Casebook* (2010), had a May 2010 release date. No doubt, it will be yet another example of her ability to write to suit audiences ranging from physicians and medical researchers to students and consumers. Her speaking style was equally adaptable, as she addressed audiences at venues ranging from global medical conferences to classrooms, small workshops, and private conversations. When Sandy and I met at a conference in 2008, I was impressed with her enthusiasm for her work. We discussed our shared interest in exploring how professionals in sexual medicine, sex therapy, and sexuality education might work together. Within several months, we had established the New Jersey Center for Sexual Wellness with a mutual acquaintance, Judith Hersh, MD, FACOG, and were the first, to our knowledge, to offer medical, psychological, and educational sexuality services under one roof in New Jersey.

The fact that Sandy jumped into a new business model late in her career was par for the course. She had a history of finding new ways to address problems. She worked with male and female patients, but she was especially drawn to women’s physical and psychological health. She developed the term *persistent genital arousal disorder (PGAD)* and was committed to helping patients with the condition. One of her last research projects was a study she was conducting with Beverly Whipple, Ph.D., RN, FAAN, using near-real-time functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) on Sandy’s patients with PGAD.

“We wanted to determine whether, if women could see their brain activity, they could find ways to decrease their symptoms through biofeedback. Women with PGAD are so grateful to Sandy for identifying their disorder,” said Whipple, professor emerita of the College of Nursing at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. She added, “She was a great researcher and therapist. I will miss working with Sandra, referring clients to her, and having her as a dear friend.”

Sandy was a world-recognized expert on menopause and infertility, heterosexual and homosexual orientations, and sexual arousal, yet she was not an ivory-tower academic. Susan Kellogg-Spadt, Ph.D., CRNP, cofounder of The Pelvic and Sexual Health Institute of Philadelphia, said, “Sandy’s endless energy and academic excellence was only superseded by her compassion for each and every one of her patients.”

That concern spilled over to the readers of *Getting the Sex You Want: A Woman’s Guide to Becoming Proud, Passionate and Pleased in Bed* (2003), which she coauthored with Judith Sachs. The consumer book is now in its second printing, and during one of our conversations Sandy expressed as much pride in the consumer book as she did in the fourth edition of her textbook.

Given her extensive writing, research, and speaking engagements, one might wonder how Sandy had time for much else. As her family, friends, and colleagues knew, however, she was a Renaissance woman with seemingly boundless energy and countless interests.

She was the first president of the International Society for the Study of Women’s Sexual Health, and was past president of the Society for Sex Therapy and Research. She was a fellow of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality. For 35 years, she was a professor in the Departments of Psychiatry and Ob/Gyn at UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and directed its Psychology Internship Program.

In 1973, Sandy cofounded the medical school’s Human Sexuality Program, which is still active, and is affectionately referred to as Sex Week by students and faculty alike.

As a consultant to major pharmaceutical companies, Sandy researched the effects of medical illness and menopause on female sexual function and dysfunction, the pharmacological enhancement of female sexuality, and the impact of the Internet on couple relationships. Two of her studies garnered a great deal of interest: the first addressed the causes, concomitants, and treatment of persistent genital arousal disorder; the second studied the aftermath of sexual abuse of boys and men by clergy.

Regarding the breadth of Sandy’s work, sexuality counselor Constance M. Bowes, MA, MS, EdD, said, “Sandra’s contributions to the practice of sex therapy were tremendous in terms of research and practice. Through her work, I learned so much about the realities and complexities of sex therapy.

She was a giant in the field, and her contributions now enhance my own practice in sex therapy.”

Bowes served with Leiblum as a founding member of the Consortium on Sexuality and Aging. Started by sexuality educator Peggy Brick in 2007, the Consortium’s mission reflects a commitment to promoting positive sexuality for older adults. As a fellow founding member, I vividly recall meetings enhanced by Sandy’s willingness to share her expertise, professional connections, and interest in promoting the Consortium members’ work.

Sandy’s contributions to the literature of sexology, psychology, and medicine will have an impact on medical and psychological care for generations to come. Likewise, memories of her will continue to have an impact on those who knew Sandy personally.

Rev. Debra W. Haffner, executive director of the Religious Institute, said, “Sandy loved her life. She was brilliant but always curious about what I was doing. She loved to learn and to do new things. I am grateful for the time I had with her and am indebted for all she taught us.”

Those sentiments were mirrored by Stayton, who said, “Her warmth, friendliness, and scholarship will long be remembered by friends and colleagues.”

For my part, I am grateful that a giant in sexology accepted me as a peer, even though I was a relative newcomer to the field. It was an honor to partner with Sandy, and my own work and research will continue to benefit from her influence.

Sandy is survived by her son Jake Kassen, husband Frank Brickle, and her brother Mark Leiblum.

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