

Memorial Session: A Tribute to Marta Aliaga — Remarks

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Abstract

After the death of Marta Aliaga, several of her friends and colleagues were invited to participate in a memorial session at JSM 2012 in San Diego to honour and celebrate her life and contributions to statistics. This paper represents my contribution to this session.

Key Words: Marta Aliaga, Argentina, human rights, scientific freedom, professional ethics

My contacts with Marta were long-term, but very limited, except during the final months of her life. I cannot recall when I first met her. I was very active in international statistics, having served as director of the United Nations Statistical Division in the late 1980s and early 1990s and I know our paths crossed during this period. She subsequently told me that she remembered me from this period.

About six years ago, I attended a meeting organized in Paris by the METAGORA project, a large-scale human rights and social survey program funded mainly by bilateral donors. As part of this program a major contract was awarded to develop a set of survey training materials. Jana Asher led this effort and Marta was engaged to review and to help finalize these materials. During this meeting, which was held in a very large, almost palatial conference hall in Paris, Jana and Marta presented the training materials that had so far been developed and responded to questions and comments from experienced survey staff from a very diverse group countries. What I still recall of that day was the great respect in which Marta was held by all participants. Participants sometimes argued with Jana, they never did with Marta.

I continued to run into Marta off and on in the latter part of the last decade, often at JSM. However, Marta and I only began working quite closely together, primarily by email, during the final few months of her life. And her contributions to that work and her dedication in carrying this work forward, despite the ever-growing challenges to her health that she silently faced, are the reasons I asked to be on this panel.

In early 2011 I learned, as chair of the ASA's Committee on Scientific Freedom and Human Rights, that the Argentine government had begun to fine and harass a group of

private sector statisticians and research organizations in Argentina for collecting, compiling, and disseminating data on consumer prices and inflation using methods the government did not approve of. The Committee responded by writing a letter of inquiry to the government about that matter and Marta, who had seen a copy of our letter, wrote to me about it on April 4.

Marta's reasons for interest and involvement in the subject were several: she was from Argentina, one of those targeted was a long-time friend and colleague, and Ron Wasserstein assigned her to help the Committee and the Board in developing the ASA response to the events in Argentina. Her major tasks in this effort were to help in communicating to the ASA views and information from those targeted and in developing detailed documentation of what the government had done. It helped greatly that she had the full confidence of those targeted in Argentina. She certainly had mine.

Between her initial email to me of April 4 and her final one to me on July 12, Marta was in very frequent correspondence with me about the situation in Argentina. She sent me 50 emails during this period – half of them during June and the first 12 days of July. Then the flow of message stopped and on July 25, we all learned about her illness. And it was only then that I began to understand the enormous effort that went into those 50 emails, let alone the extensive and detailed work that went behind them.

Let me close by simply expressing my gratitude for all that Marta has done for statistics and statisticians around the world.