Deborah Blum brought an unshakable love and respect for older people, an innate understanding of geriatric care management, practical problem solving skills, a positive outlook and good humor, and a fine Brooklyn accent to Iona, assisting hundreds and hundreds of older people and families in the metropolitan area as they experienced the challenges of aging. The following is an interview with Deborah as she is prepared to retire from Iona after twenty-six years, and move to Sarasota, FL at the end of June, 2012.

MC: As you come to your last week at Iona, what do you find yourself reflecting on?

DB: I’m going to start crying. [Laughs] It has been an amazing job from the day I came. First, I learned so much from so many people, but especially from Barbara Soniat [Associate Professor of Social Worker at the Catholic University of America and Deborah’s first supervisor at Iona] who is my mentor. She taught me so much in her humble way, but brilliant — just brilliant. When I first got here, I thought, “Wow, this is the job I just got? I’m out here visiting people in their homes? And they are letting me in so I can help?” [Laughs]

You know, I was at a Bar Mitzvah recently and this poem they read really made me think of this job. It was about how you can save a life, and that by saving a life — we save the world. And here in our little corner of the world we save many lives. We assist people so they can live. So we save the world. And that’s the journey, I think for all of us here. We’re social services on the front lines. It is very hard for me to go because of this work and these wonderful people.

There are certain people who stand out in my mind who will stay with me forever. Like this one client who was so anxious that she would call my voice mail at night and put the receiver down on her pillow so that she could sleep. We were together for a long time — 12 years. She didn’t have any family, so I was the closest thing to family.

MC: Who else will stay with you?

DB: A call came in very late on a Friday night about 20 years ago about a man who lived off 16th Street. When I knocked on the
Iona is keeping good company in the greater Washington DC community of non-profit organizations this year, first by being selected to work with Compass and then as only one of 74 organizations in the 2012-13 Catalogue of Philanthropy: Greater Washington.

Iona was selected for a Compass strategic alliances project in September 2011. Compass pro-bono consulting teams, mainly MBA alumni from top business schools, work to strengthen the capacity, effectiveness and sustainability of Greater Washington DC nonprofits. The Board and staff at Iona asked for a strategic alignment project to explore the full utilization of the Breckinridge building on Albemarle Street, NW and to provide the most relevant services to older adults as baby boomers age. In May, the Compass team presented their findings to the Board and staff to use as they develop a new strategic plan this coming year.

A panel of over 100 expert reviewers from area foundations, corporate giving programs, and peer nonprofit organizations evaluated 220 applications for inclusion in the 2012-13 Catalogue for Philanthropy: Greater Washington. In June, Iona was named one of 74 outstanding nonprofits to be featured in the publication this year. This is the second time that Iona has been so honored.

Now in its tenth year, the Catalogue’s mission is to connect people with worthy community causes. According to Barbara Harman, President and Editor of the Catalogue for Philanthropy: Greater Washington, “Many nonprofits continue to suffer during the slow economic recovery, and the search for support has been intensified by the loss of government (and sometimes of foundation) funding. Individual donors can continue to make a real difference, keeping great organizations afloat during these challenging times.”

To find out more about Iona and why these organizations consider it an outstanding non-profit, please come visit on the second Wednesday of the month for coffee, conversation and a tour of Iona with Sally White. To make reservations, please call Meg Artley, (202) 895-9401 or email martley@iona.org.
door, out came this operatic voice, the most gorgeous singing! Just started singing to me — didn’t say hello. It was a song in Yiddish, a song that my father sang to me. And the tears immediately sprang to my eyes. I had to control myself. I developed a very strong relationship with him. It was a difficult case. He ate at McDonald’s every single day and he hitchhiked up and down 16th Street to get there. And sure enough one day I drove down 16th Street and there he was and I pulled over to the side and yelled, “Where are you going?” “McDonald’s of course!” and then he got in my car! [Laughs] I eventually got him to a better place — it was hard. He was very attached to the apartment even though it was so depressing the way he was living.

And there are many cases where I feel like people are caught in the middle. They have too much money to receive public benefits and they’re not wealthy enough to afford services on their own. They are caught in the middle and they don’t get anything. Those are the cases that are so upsetting. You try to be so creative. You’re happy when you are able to do just one thing. When I first started I had a client who was behind on her rent by $3,000. I just called around to a couple of churches and was able to get her rent paid.

MC: When was that?

DB: In the early eighties. No longer though. Karen McCray [who used to work at Iona] and I were talking the other day about how fun Christmas used to be. We would get presents to give away to people from a local congregation — they’d ask what each [philanthropic and subsidized care management] client needed and they would go out and buy and wrap the presents. We’d get to deliver them. It was so fulfilling. One of the synagogues still gives grocery cards, which is nice — but these gifts were individualized and specific to the clients. Something special just for them.

MC: You’ve had a special calling here at Iona, haven’t you? You’ve been the person who has worked with people who have mental health issues in addition to needing support through the challenges of aging.

DB: I did my internship at St. Elizabeths in the early eighties. It was such a resource to the community — really cutting edge, amazing research came out of St. Elizabeths. Now, if you need a residential treatment facility for a low-income older person with a mental health issue there are very few places to send them.

There is another family I’m serving now with a member who has struggled all her life with a mental illness. It is heartbreaking that I’m going to leave before I find a good outcome for treatment for the client and her family. If she goes into a nursing home she isn’t going to get the treatment she needs. The other places that are set up for someone with her issues are just too far out of town for her family to continue to be the support that they are to her.

MC: Let’s talk about legacy. What do you hope for Iona?

DB: I feel really good about Sally [White] as [Executive] Director. Iona’s growing. Things are really happening. Sally has the most magnificent way with people. She’s so compassionate, so honest and giving to the staff and the people we serve. Sally and I came to Iona a month apart in 1986. I know that Iona is in such good hands. I would hope that Iona can continue to grow and lead and serve all the people who are in need.

Deborah Blum has joined a small but dedicated band of social work alumni who have informed the field of geriatric care management and who continue to offer expertise and support to current staff. Donations to the Annual Fund at Iona help provide excellent and compassionate care management to people who are in need.

Tribute gifts in Deborah Blum’s honor are being gratefully accepted and will be published in the 2012 Annual Report next spring.
A Legacy of Love

He breathed a sigh of relief when he called Iona. He was the one who decided that it was time to reach out for help, calling the Helpline and sharing his concerns with a knowledgeable professional. Very soon thereafter, he met with a care manager who listened and responded with respect and kindness, with answers to his most pressing questions, and solutions for the unique challenges that he was experiencing. He’s placing Iona in his will because he wants to make sure that other people in his community will receive the same care and compassion.

At parties, her mother would introduce herself as a professional volunteer. She smiles when she remembers her mother coordinating the bake sale at church, or her perfect attendance at the local library booster meetings, and the gig as a guest reader at a local elementary school just last year. When her mother passed away, it seemed only fitting to make a legacy memorial gift from her mother’s estate to Iona, an organization that celebrates and honors older volunteers for what they continue to give the community, not just what they have given.

He never expected to care this much about the person he had been assigned to visit once a month as a volunteer companion. He found himself thinking about grocery items he could get for her when he went to the store, or calling her to see if she was alright after a big storm. His visits were effortless as they laughed and shared stories about their lives. Even though he is just starting his professional life in the city and saving to buy a house, he has added Iona as a beneficiary to his workplace life insurance policy so that the volunteer companion program can provide the riches of an intergenerational friendship with others.

Every gift, regardless of amount, is important to Iona. Planned or special gifts, however, usually carry an important and unique story, ripe with lessons of human kindness and compassion. “I so love hearing the stories,” says Meg Artley, Director of Development. “That’s a huge and important part of the gift for Iona.”

A planned or special gift secures the important work Iona does and the story underscores the way in which we are to do our work now and for generations to come. Since the gift comes with such meaning, we make three commitments to those who are considering a planned or special gift: Iona will be a good steward of the funds you have entrusted to us. We will honor your wishes and we will never forget your generosity and your commitment to older people and family caregivers in our community.

To inquire about a planned or special gift to Iona, please call Meg Artley, (202) 895-9401 or email her at martley@iona.org.

CORPORATE PARTNERS

Many thanks to our partners in aging and health services who share our mission to support people as they experience the challenges and opportunities of aging. If you are interested in knowing more about the benefits of partnership with Iona, please contact Diane Greenspun dgreenspun@iona.org or (202) 895-9443.

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Home Care Assistance
Home Instead Senior Care
KPMG
Marshfield Associates
The Methodist Home & Forest Side
New Hampshire Pharmacy and Medical Equipment
NIL Holdings
Options for Senior America
The Residences at Thomas Circle
Roadside Development
Seabury Resources for Aging
Sibley Memorial Hospital
VITAS Innovative Hospice Care
Washington Gas
The Washington Home and Community Hospices
Almost Insurmountable Challenges
The following email was sent by Randy Smith, Iona Care Manager, to the rest of the staff. It illustrates the complex needs of some older neighbors in the city and the effort and creativity of Iona staff required to serve someone well.

From: Randy Smith
Subject: Celebrating a Success
Date: June 8, 2012 10.10 AM EST
To: The Iona Family

Dear Colleagues,

Miss Long went home to her Cleveland Park apartment today! Her homecoming was truly an Iona team effort. Many staffers contributed to her release from the nursing home where she spent six long months.

In many ways, Miss Long is the classic Iona care management client: 94 years old, single, alone, increasingly frail. Her only living family member is an 89 year old brother in California. After an injury and rehabilitation in a nursing home, her only wish was to return to her apartment of 40+ years and yet she was unable to do so. Her income was too high to qualify for Medicaid to pay for home health care she needed, yet it was not enough to pay for these services. She had no one to advocate for her except for us. She had no voice and no power other than what Iona could bring on her behalf. I’m writing to say thank you to key Iona staff who helped Miss Long safely home after six long and unnecessary months in a nursing home.

Thanks to Director Sharon O’Connor and to the entire staff of the Wellness & Arts Center at Iona who have warmly welcomed Miss Long into the program and to all of our donors out there who have given generously so that we can provide this support to someone in need free of charge. Attending the Center five days a week, Miss Long’s health is monitored by our wonderful RNs, she participates in a variety of programs to keep herself physically and intellectually active, and she enjoys lunch and the companionship of other participants.

Thank you also to Iona transportation coordinator Darryl Simpson who arranges the transportation that brings Miss Long to and from Iona every day on the bus supplied by the DC Office on Aging. Nutritionist Rose Clifford and Social Worker Meghan Zanelli worked a miracle to get home delivered meals for Miss Long. My Iona colleagues Deb Rubenstein, Deborah Blum and Carol Kaplun and Judy Levy of the DC Long Term Care Coalition offered strategy, support and advice as we worked through the many roadblocks and challenges to getting Miss Long back home. As we all put our heads together over the last few months and with the instrumental help of Judy Hubbard of Ward 3 Councilwoman Mary M. Cheh’s staff, we were able to find philanthropic and low cost home health care for her seven days a week. This was the final break we needed to get Miss Long back to her apartment.

As you all know, I feel very strongly that this situation should not happen again to anyone in our city. Sally White and Judy Levy were by my side when I testified to DC City Council in April, asking them to consider a needs-based approach in their wait list for in-home services. I know you share my concerns that the wait list for the Elderly and Disabled Persons (EPD) Waiver is now over 700 names long — in fact, Miss Long still waits for help at number 566 on the list. We were able to cobble together a plan for her to leave the nursing home with her existing assets and benefits because as Number 566, she would have never gotten home.

We should all take pride in fulfilling Iona’s mission of supporting people as they face the challenges of aging — and for Miss Long, those challenges were almost insurmountable without your help. Thank you team Iona.

Randy Smith
Care Manager
rsmith@iona.org
EVENTS  SUMMER/FALL 2012

Call 202-895-9448 [select option 4] for more information.

August 6, 2012
The Playwright’s Forum
A reading of Anna Freud at the Regina Hotel by Myron Hafetz. A $3 donation is requested.
7-8:30 pm

August 8 and September 12, 2012
Coffee, Conversation and a Tour of Iona Senior Services with Executive Director Sally White. Free. Register with Meg Artley (202) 895-9401 or martley@iona.org.
9-10 am

August 14 and September 11, 2012
Community Advocacy Workshop Series
August: Choice in Community — Access and Equity Housing Rights with speakers Barbara Cline, leading advocate for equitable and affordable housing and Sadie Healy, Special Projects Coordinator, Equal Rights Center (ERC).
September: Advocacy in Action. Participants will be mentored by a range of experienced community advocates to help them develop their unique advocacy voice and capacity to be effective and efficient agents of change. Presented by Iona and AARP-DC. Register in advance with Lylie Fisher, Director of Community Engagement, (202) 895-9425 or lfisher@iona.org. Free.
Tenleytown Library
2-3:30 pm

August 28, 2012
Last chance to learn from Jenne Glover, Artist in Residence until September, at a workshop at the Active Wellness program at St. Albans’s Episcopal Church. Free.
11 am-12 pm

September 11, 2012
Fall Classes Begin — The Program Schedule will be published at the end of August. Please call (202) 895-9416 to make sure you are on the email listserve or to let us know that you would appreciate a paper copy.

September 12, 2012 - January 4, 2013
Iona welcomes Artist in Residence Teresa Ficaretta (painter) and Joan Shapiro (jeweler).

Gallery open 9 am-5 pm Monday through Friday

September 13, 2012 Lunch and Learn w/ Joan Shapiro
September 20, 2012 Lunch and Learn w/ Teresa Ficaretta
Bring your own lunch. Register with Patricia Dubroof, Gallery Director, (202) 895-9407 or pdubroof@iona.org.
12:30-1:30 pm

October 19, 2012
Meet the Artist Reception with painter Teresa Ficaretta and jeweler Joan Shapiro, featuring refreshments and live music. Free.
5-8 pm