

McGill Medicine Focus, Fall 2015

A FORCE OF NATURE

The first (and only) female Chair of the Biochemistry Department
Early champion of equal pay for equal work in academia

by IAN MCGILLIS



The life and career of **Rose Mamelak Johnstone, BSc'50, PhD'53**, represent a remarkable journey and a lasting legacy. Her son, Michael Johnstone, BSc'77, MDCM'82, who established the Rose Mamelak Johnstone Research Bursary after her 2009 passing, was more than happy to talk about his mother on the phone from his home in Brighton, Massachusetts, where he is a practising cardiologist.

Born in 1928 in Lodz, Poland, Rose arrived in Montreal with her family at age 8, just before the outbreak of World War II; many of her relatives who remained behind would die in the Holocaust. Growing up around St-Laurent Blvd., Rose progressed from speaking no English to being a top-of-the-class graduate at Baron Byng High School. From there she went on to McGill, where she discovered a passion for the relatively new field of biochemistry. "Her area was dealing with cell membranes and the transport system within them—things that, as a cardiologist, roll off my tongue now, that are a given, but were quite new then."

Rose married Douglas Johnstone in 1953, and the two went to England from 1954 to '56 so that Rose could pursue post-doctoral research. "My father, unusually for that time, said 'Sure, I'll go to England with you,' said Johnstone. "This is an interesting thing in the nature of the relationship. I always felt that my parents were 20 to 25 years ahead of their time. He put his career on the back burner to allow hers to grow and flourish."

In 1956 the Johnstones returned to McGill. In 1961 Rose joined the Department of Biochemistry, where in 1980 she was named Chair, becoming just the second woman to be so honoured by a science department of a Canadian university. She stayed in the position until 1990, during which time her significant hires included Phillippe Gros, PhD'83, John Silvius and Gordon Shore, PhD'74.

As stellar as her academic career was, Rose made an equally important contribution as a tireless campaigner for equal pay for equal work in academia. "At the universities, it was long assumed that because a woman could depend on her husband's salary, hers didn't have to be equal," said Johnstone. "What we take for granted now, she had to really push for."

Looking back, what Johnstone finds most amazing about his mother is the balance she maintained. "She was able to be not only a scientist, an administrator and a teacher, but also a terrific parent to my brother Eric and to me," he said, citing the example of her taking on the department chair, a choice many women even today might forego for lifestyle reasons. "She took it because it was a challenge, but first she presented the idea to her family and asked us what we thought, and of course we were all for it. As kids we accepted it as the norm that she was always working, always distracted, because we knew through it all that she deeply loved us. And our father was behind her every step of the way. One of the lessons learned, I guess, is choose your spouse well."

Of the bursary he sponsors in his mother's honour, Johnstone said, "It's designed for women who are thinking of going into a scientific career, to encourage their interest and to help them overcome some of the obstacles that are still in the path of women in science today. Anything that I can do to help foster that is the best way I can extend and memorialize Rose's spirit."