

COUNTDOWN TO BOSTON

42 DAYS



"I" is for Icon: Isabelle

In his 1999 book *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement*, the then Archbishop of Canterbury (and my favorite theologian), Rowan Williams noted: "The word 'icon' has come down in the world. It is probably more familiar as a term of art in the world of communication technology than as the designation of a sacred image; perhaps for most people its commonest use is to designate a particular kind of public figure.'



Like so many things in our woefully wired world ("www," right?), the word has come down even further since then, trimmed and tapered in a way that twitters away depth and meaning, but some of what Williams goes on to offer still holds: "An icon...is a classic statement of a particular kind of life; 'iconic status' means something more like becoming part of the code of a community, becoming in some way an image that binds people together, provides a common point of reference and a common touchstone of acceptability."

Often, though not always when we think of cultural icons, we think of those who come instantly to mind with mere mention of their first name: think Oprah, Beyoncé or Baryshnikov on "the Big Stage." Smaller stages, subcultures or subcommunities will have their icons as well, although they may not cross boundaries and be instantly recognizable on the bigger stages. Mention "Miles" among jazz enthusiasts and they will know without thinking you mean Miles Davis, whereas someone younger, less familiar with jazz, may flash instead on Platinum or Gold airline perks.

Child Neurology is a small world, after all. But within that world few figures loom larger, and no first name is more self-contained and iconic than "Isabelle." Younger child neurologists not immersed in neurobehavioral and neurodevelopmental topics may need to hear the full name, "Isabelle Rapin" to join in the conversation, but for those working in that subspecialty, and for all neurologists of a certain age, "Isabelle" says it all. As her colleague at Einstein, and winner of the 2019 Outstanding Training Director Award, Karen Ballaban-Gil, MD noted in a tribute written for the CNS in 2017: "Isabelle Rapin was professor emerita in the Saul R. Korey Department of Neurology and the Department of Pediatrics at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. A longtime colleague and friend, mentor to generations of child neurologists in the US and world-wide and one of the pioneers in child neurology Dr. Rapin was born in Lausanne, Switzerland, the eldest of three children, to a Swiss father and American mother. In an age when it was unusual for women to attend university, let alone attain advanced graduate degrees, the then ten-year-old Isabelle decided she wanted to become a physician."

She went on to become more than just "a" physician. She became, in time, someone the outside world knew through casual reading as "the mother of Autism," or as the *New York Times* put it with a dash more class, "the doyenne of Autism." Within the CNS and the International Child Neurology Association (ICNA), she was simply – or not so simply – "Isabelle." For me, anytime

her name came to mind it comes in the shape or sound of David Stumpf's voice calling out "Isabelle?" from the podium of the joint CNS-ICNA meeting in 1994 as she stood patiently waiting by a floor microphone. There is in David's voice a quality of excitement and delight that seemed almost made for that moment or so many more like it in so many meetings like it where neurologists or speech and language specialist were gathered in conference and Isabelle stood next to the floor microphone, calmly, patiently, even humbly waiting her turn. Like Dave Stumpf's in that 1994 instant, many others, I'm sure, have called on Isabelle in a tone of voice that carried both an air of expectation and an edge of anxiety, the moderator knowing that the moment about to unfold might contain both brilliant commentary and one or more piercing, illuminating, wonderful-to-think-about-but-hard-to-answer questions; either way, the witting or unwitting panelist had better be ready. Pictured below are a few of those who have enjoyed moments like that one or more times through the year: (L-R) Drs. Pasquale Accardo, Bruce Shapiro, Doris Trauner, and Isabelle Rapin.



I remember talking to Sarah Spence, MD, PhD at Boston Children's Hospital last year and smiling as she recounted a meeting where she thanked the organizers for having her speak after Isabelle rather than before her "so that she couldn't correct at everything I said. And I got her to laugh." That, Sarah noted, was the beginning of a beautiful friendship, one many others in the field can recall with equal fondness. (The story can be heard around the 21:00 minute mark of the video hosted on the CNS website, *CNS Conversations*. The whole video is worth watching. Sarah is a great conversation partner; talking to her in the morning will wake you up and put you in a good mood for the day better than the best cup of dark roast coffee. **[Click here to view.](#)**)


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Sarah Spence, MD, PhD
Assistant, Department of Neurology, Co-Director, Autism Spectrum Center
 Assistant Professor of Neurology, Harvard Medical School

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SEP
Pellock Resident

Channeling Dr. Ballaban-Gil again (Karen is pictured below, top row-center, in a group shot taken on the occasion of Solomon "Nico" Moshé, MD receiving the 2017 Sachs Award): "Over the course of her career, she helped train over 100 child neurology residents, as well as scores of adult neurologists. Many of those 100 child neurology trainees specifically choose to train at Einstein in order to have the opportunity to be taught by her, and some credit their decision to become a child neurologist to her influence. Not only did she teach her trainees clinical neurology, she also educated them in research, critically reviewing of the literature, preparing lectures and writing manuscripts. Dr. Rapin mentored many academic child neurologists at various stages of their careers and provided particular encouragement to women in training at a time when women were very much a minority in the field."



One of those young trainees who fell under her spell was CNS President-elect Bruce Cohen, who recalls how as a med student interested in neurology, he had what could have been an awkward conversation with his mentor, Albert Spiro, MD, the 2018 recipient of the Brumback Lifetime Achievement Award. Innocently thinking at the time that Dr. Spiro was an adult neurologist specializing in muscle disorders, Bruce expressed particular interest in doing a child neurology rotation with Isabelle Rapin, hoping thereby to "learn from the best teacher in the field." In a moment that reveals much about both Einstein Med School giants, "Dr. Spiro leaned back in his chair, paused for a moment, then laconically replied, "Yes, she is the best."

One cannot talk about Isabelle without noting that, in a manner befitting an icon, she also embodied the virtues of loyalty and longevity: Over a half-century on faculty at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and 58 years of marriage to Harold Oaklander, a PhD candidate at Columbia when they met, who went on to become the Founder and Director of the Alliance for the Prevention of Unemployment. Together they raised four children, including one, Ann-Louise Oaklander, MD, PhD, who became an adult neurologist at the Massachusetts General Hospital.

When she passed away in the spring of 2017, we all rued the certain knowledge that we would not see her at another CNS meeting. She was and has been with us in spirit, however. I remember receiving an email from her the previous winter, relating how pleased she was that her longtime colleague and friend at Einstein, Nico Moshé, whom she had nominated for the Bernard Sachs

Award, and an icon in his own right, would be receiving that award and delivering that lecture at the CNS Annual Meeting in Kansas City. In delivering a eulogy on the opening morning of the 2017 meeting for one of the first ABPN boarded child neurologists, a member of the first CNS Executive Committee, and recipient of the 1987 Hower Award, CNS President, Ken Mack marveled: "The breadth and depth of her knowledge was exceeded only by her collaborative spirit and her unflinching willingness to engage younger colleagues in conversation who sought her wise counsel at Einstein Medical Center or at any number of national and international meetings."



In closing – and how else can one close but by giving Isabelle herself the last word? – I offer you an excerpt from her autobiographical reflections published in the *Journal of Child Neurology* in 2001:

"The message I would give a young colleague is that child neurology is a wonderfully rewarding field, intellectually and personally, because of the families you will meet. In order to have it all, that is, be married, have children, restore and furnish an antique house, work in the garden, enjoy a lot of what life offers, and have a great job, you need a supportive and generous mate, adequate baby sitting and house help, flexibility, good humor, and a nose for the unusual. Consider every patient a potential source of new knowledge, describe what you see, pursue your interests vigorously, and learn to cut corners and prioritize. Find a good mentor, enjoy what you do, and be lucky."

Until tomorrow, (the letter "J")
Roger

Roger Larson, CAE
Executive Director

On-line Registration is Open!

Registration is now open for the long awaited 50th Golden Anniversary Meeting of the Child Neurology Society in Boston. Registrants attending this milestone meeting live and in-person in Boston will want to register early (some sessions are limited and reservation-only). You will also want to book hotel rooms ASAP. A link and access code to the Sheraton Boston Hotel will be included in your registration confirmation email.

2021 CNS 50th Annual Meeting

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