

Zena Werb
March 24, 1945 – June 18, 2020

Dr. Zena Werb was born in Germany in 1945 in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp (KZ Bergen-Belsen), a few weeks before the camp was liberated. She died suddenly at the age of 75 years on 16 June 2020, in her house in San Francisco. Zena was a professor and vice chair in the Department of Anatomy at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) for over 40 years and was the associate director for basic science at the UCSF Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center. She was one of the first researchers to recognize the major importance of the tumor microenvironment with respect to regulation of malignant transformation, metastasis, and response to therapy. Her specific focus was on macrophage physiology, the extracellular matrix, mammary gland development, breast cancer, and tumor-associated inflammation, and she made major scientific contributions in those areas. For her work, Dr. Werb received many awards and honors: election to the National Academy of Sciences and the American Association for Cancer Research, presidency of the American Society of Cell Biology, election as a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the E.B. Wilson Medal from the American Society of Cell Biology (ASCB) and the Paget-Ewing Award from the Metastasis Research Society. Zena was also a devoted mentor and a fierce advocate for junior faculty and particularly women, and in 2010 she received the Lifetime Achievement Award from Women in Cell Biology, an ASCB subgroup, as well as in 2015 the UCSF Lifetime Achievement in Mentoring Award.

After the war, Zena's family emigrated to Canada in 1948, where she was raised on a farm and attended a one room schoolhouse. Dr. Werb received her B.Sc. in Biochemistry from the University of Toronto in 1966, and her Ph.D. in Cell Biology from Rockefeller University in 1971, working under the supervision of Zanvil Cohn on a thesis titled "Dynamics of macrophage membrane cholesterol". After graduation she worked at the Strangeways Research Laboratory in Cambridge, United Kingdom as a postdoctoral fellow with John T. Dingle from 1971 to 1973 and as a research associate from 1973 to 1975. Dr. Werb spent a year as a visiting assistant professor at Dartmouth Medical School in New Hampshire before moving to the University of California, San Francisco in 1976, where she became a full professor in 1983. In 2007, she spent a sabbatical at the Max Planck Institute through an Alexander von Humboldt Research Award.

In addition to making many seminal discoveries in cancer biology, and serving as a strong advocate for women in science, she enjoyed visiting museums, was very fond of the opera, and was an outstanding cook.