



Joan Luedders Wolfe

Birth: 1929

Death: N/A

Father:

Mother

Joan Luedders Wolfe was born in Highland Park, MI. One of three children, Ms. Wolfe had a fraternal twin brother and a younger sister. According to Ms. Wolfe, her father, who became a successful real estate appraiser, encouraged her to be a secretary “because he thought by being a secretary [she] could become an administrative person to the head boss [presumably a man].”

In high school, Ms. Wolfe was the vice president of her senior class. After graduation, she attended Hollins College, near Roanoke, VA, for 2 ½ years. At her first assembly upon arriving on campus, a woman who was president of the senior class spoke. Along with her mother and her friends, this woman became a role model for Ms. Wolfe. They liked to get things done. “. . . I never aspired to be head of anything in particular, but I did aspire to get things done,” said Ms. Wolfe.

She transferred to University of Michigan for her last 1 ½ years and pledged the Pi Beta Phi Sorority. In 1951, she graduated with a major in Economics. “[I] . . . went from classes of 9 to classes of 450, and I would be the only woman in the room.” Her father had discouraged from pursuing an education or social work degree.

In 1951 her first job was as an assistant to J. R. Miller, who eventually became president of the Ford Motor Co. In 1952 she moved with a group of sorority sisters to Boston. She stayed there for less than a year and then came back home in 1953 to marry Willard Wolfe. Ms. Wolfe was 24 years old at the time.

After her husband had graduated from dental school, the young family moved to Grand Rapids. By then they had two boys—five and three years old. At that point Ms. Wolfe became a housewife, mother, and substitute teacher.

At that time Ms. Wolfe also became very interested in the preservation of the environment. She pointed to two influences in her life that lead to this interest. First, her Girl Scout experience had taught her about the environment. Second, her reading of Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, turned her into an environmentalist.

Her interest in birds resulted from a walk with her husband in Dearborn, MI. On that walk, her husband pointed out a "grackle." Ms. Wolfe was amazed that this bird could be in her life and she not know it. Thus, she became an avid birdwatcher and joined the Audubon Society of America.

In Grand Rapids, Ms. Wolfe became the junior leader for the Grand Rapids chapter of the Audubon Society. She was also the "water chair" for the League of Women Voters. In 1966 Ms. Wolfe organized a dinner to shine a spotlight on the dangers of pesticides on birds. Forty people attended.

In 1968, the Environmental Action Council (EAC) was founded by Ms. Wolfe's initiative. Its purpose was to serve as an umbrella organization for at least 80 environmental organizations. Wolfe had invited four people—a local attorney, Bill Moody; a local business owner, Bruce Forsland; a fellow Audubon Society member, Norma Raby, and a local UAW member, Ken Komar—to help her write the by-laws and petition to the state for the authorization of this new group.

The same 40 people who had attended the 1966 dinner came to the first meeting of the EAC. The keynote speaker was the then director of the DNR, Ralph McMullen. At that time, the two key issues were water pollution and "hard" pesticides that stayed in the environment and food chain.

In 1970, then Congressman Joe Sax wrote a bill that would allow a person to sue a polluter on behalf of the environment. He or she didn't need to be affected directly by the pollution, but only care about the environment. This bill was supported by the UAW, League of Women Voters, and the Junior League. But when it was introduced in the House by the chair of the conservation committee, because of controversy, he could find only one co-sponsor and only the DNR supported it. Nevertheless, within a year the bill became law because of, according to Ms. Wolfe, the "huge number of organizations that came to the second public hearing as a result of her and the EAC's efforts." This law became well known as the Michigan Environmental Protection Act (MEPA).

Over the years the EAC changed its name to the West Michigan Environmental Action Council (WMEAC) and raised a lot of money for suits, according to Ms. Wolfe. Eventually, with its growth, a professional staff was hired. At one time, she was part-time and then full-time director.

The key issue changed to waste disposal, particularly nuclear waste disposal. "I worked my head off on that, and I give myself credit for coordinating and eliciting the help that we needed," said Ms. Wolf. That work resulted in changes to policy at not only the state level, but also the national level. She also commented that two years after the MEPA had been passed, the Inland Lakes and Streams Act became law and that bill had been "more difficult" to get passed than the MEPA.

In 1973, then Michigan Governor Milliken appointed Ms. Wolfe as the first woman to the Natural Resources Commission. She said her 9 years on that board were “a very difficult, distressing experience for her,” especially when she rotated into the chair position. The other commissioners and the public were very rude to her. Their behavior expressed their attitude that she did not belong there: the commission was not “women’s territory” as women knew nothing about the “out of doors.”

In addition to her work with WMEAC, Ms. Wolf volunteered on the board of the National Audubon Society and at the Resource Recovery Department for Kent County. She also taught enrichment classes at Oakdale Elementary School and belonged to a book club at Fountain Street Church.

In 1981, she became a published author with her book, *Making Things Happen: The Guide for Members of Volunteer Organizations*. In 1991 the book was published again with a slightly different title, *Making Things Happen: How to be Effective as a Volunteer*.

Other Resources

<http://www.michiganwomen.org>

<http://www.therapidian.org/joan-wolfe-legacy-wmeacs-founder-1>