



Nancy Palmer Mueller

Born: December 20, 1921

Death: May 19, 2011

“My roots go back a very long way in Grand Rapids,” said Nancy. Her great-grandfather, Harry Eaton, came to the area in 1836 and was elected sheriff of Kent County in 1840. He was also the first treasurer of Walker Township. In 1842, her great-grandfather, Henry Seymour, opened the young town's first school, the Grand Rapids Academy. Her grandfather, Walter Millard Palmer, was mayor of Grand Rapids. Her grandmother, Jeanette Hinsdill Palmer, was a founder of the Golden Rule Society and the Mary Free Bed Guild. Her mother, Florence Eaton Palmer, was one of the founders of the YWCA's Camp Newaygo. Her father, Walter Seymour Palmer, was an early city planner and the creator of the 1920s “Bartholomew Plan.”

Her mother and her grandmother “influenced [her life] a great deal.” Both were leaders in the community. Nancy described her mother as “. . . quite an independent woman, working for the YWCA, teaching bridge, [and] playing golf . . . so I grew up knowing that women could do most anything if they put their minds to it,” she concluded. Her grandmother, Jeannette Hinsdill Palmer, “helped through The Golden Rule Society [this group sewed bedding for the hospital] and working with Mr. Butterworth and a few other private citizens to get adequate beds for children and their mothers.”

Nancy was an only child and was raised in what is now called “Heritage Hill.” At that time, she described the neighborhood as “tough,” but “heaven” to her. She had a “wonderful” childhood with a “great mix of friendships. . . . My family was big on trying everything,” Nancy said. Her dad would also tell her she could do anything. She learned “city planning” from her “father’s knee and was always very interested in urban growth.”

Before the Great Depression, for 3 years, Nancy went to a “small, private school . . . called Miss Eastman’s School.” She remembered taking French, which was “wonderful,” and being “dragged” to dancing school, which she learned to love.

With the onset of the Great Depression, Nancy’s family could no longer afford to send her to the private school. So she went to the “unsegregated” Lafayette School, which she described as “a school in transition.” She recalled having “very little awareness of different cultures or that they

were different because we all hung around a funny little candy store across the street [from the school].”

As she moved on to Central High School, Nancy’s ballroom dance skills were often on display. She did demonstrations “a little after Betty Ford did [them] with Dick Markoff, who was a wonderful dancer.” After graduating from high school in 1939, having been inspired by several of her teachers who had graduated from Vassar College, Nancy went on to that institution. In 1943, Nancy graduated from Vassar with a “focus on sociology and economics.” Her really interest, however, was the “community and tying those courses together” to do city planning.

As she entered her junior year at Vassar, the United States entered WWII, and “everything changed,” according to Nancy. For example, as an economics major, she was then required to take specific Saturday courses and to pass the War Manpower Commission exams. The maid and food services to which she had been accustomed were no more. Food was rationed; blackouts occurred at night; no men were around anymore; and the women no longer traveled to nearby colleges.

Upon graduation, Nancy moved to Steamboat Springs, CO, as a contracted counselor and dance teacher “at a Perry Mansfield.” Reflecting on that time, Nancy said, “I taught preschool and dance and was trying to get a job in [city] planning.” However, her mother became seriously ill, so Nancy moved back to Grand Rapids without accomplishing her plan. Nevertheless, while in Colorado, Nancy found a group of friends who were all downhill ski enthusiasts.

Soon after arriving back home, Nancy was hired as the economic analyst for the City Planning Commission and the assistant to the Metropolitan Committee, “which was a volunteer organization, hoping to secure cooperation from all [local governmental] groups.” “During that period, planning was expanding like crazy and there was plenty of money for it. There were no men around to do the jobs, so very soon I was promoted to assistant planning director,” she said. About her early city planning experience, Nancy added:

At the end of the war, housing was becoming a terrible problem. . . . The housing authority converted [the seven-story, one-elevator] Exhibitor’s Building into rental housing. . . . I supervised people who came in . . . [and learned about] the need for open space and environmental quality. . . . It was a deplorable situation. . . . High rises are an inducement to crime because there is simply no space, a place, an environment that’s conducive to healthy living.

While she was working for the city at the end of the war, Nancy also did volunteer work. She would travel to the Battle Creek Veterans Hospital to visit and teach severely wounded soldiers. She started out teaching weaving, but neither she nor the veterans liked that craft. So Nancy eventually taught them how to use a slide ruler and how to make flies for fly fishing.

During that time, she also did choreography for Civic Theatre. She remembered especially the production of *Green Grows the Lilacs*. As Nancy remembered, there still were no men around, but the Coast Guard was in town, “fluoridating the water.” So those young men, “who were dying to meet local young ladies,” were recruited. None of them could dance, but “the female

dancers were wonderful, and the Coast Guard did their best. That was a great fun period during the war,” she recalled. Nancy was also involved with the Junior League, especially productions of children’s theatre.

In addition to her hospital and theatre volunteer work, for many years Nancy held the position of vice president in the League of Women Voters. Her focus was a “local item,” on the agenda, which was city planning and cooperation. During the early 1960s, she was serving as the chair of the State Board of the League of Women Voters and researching and testifying at the Con Con (constitutional convention), trying to get an article in the state constitution that enabled counties to have “home rule.”

Before that work was completed, however, Nancy moved to Cheyenne, WY, because her husband, Fritz Mueller, whom she had married in 1949, was starting a business with a friend. At the time of that move, their two girls, Margo Palmer and Shelley Darrah, were nine and seven years old respectively. Only nine months later, the family moved to Denver, CO, where they lived for 12 years.

Reflecting on those years, Nancy said that it was “a long period of my life . . . [and had] an impact . . . on my family and my thinking and my interest in women’s issues.” She had had a lump on her chest looked at the day before moving out West and “woke up a day later, as the moving van was being packed, with an extreme radical mastectomy.” At the time, “. . . women were [not] as open about mastectomies, and [there was] even much [less] awareness of the impact on a woman’s psychology.” Nevertheless, she and her girls “became a very strong little unit, lost in the new community with no support system whatsoever.” She also became “somewhat of a ski bum for a number of years” as she was told by her doctors not to work outside of the home. Eventually, after she recovered from her surgery and its setbacks, Nancy was hired by the Denver, CO, American Red Cross and came to realize that if the basic family unit was not healthy and strong, then no adequate housing alone would make a difference.

In 1974, after divorcing her husband, Nancy returned to Grand Rapids. She soon was asked to be the director of the newly formed Our Hope Association, which became a model for women’s alcoholism treatment. It was started at a time when there was no awareness of the different needs of women in alcoholism treatment. Furthermore, there was little acceptance of the fact that women had alcohol problems at all. Alcoholism among women was known as the “hidden disease” because many women were at home.

In the early days, Nancy described Our Hope’s focus as “a marketing thing.” “People got to us through social services, not through medical professions.” By the time of this interview, however, the referrals had changed—many in the house came from the hospitals’ detoxification units. But in the early days, according to Nancy, it was an “uphill battle to find interest, raise funds, [and] keep the standards up.” Our Hope had a “homelike atmosphere” in which the women learned life skills and rebuilt their lives. When Nancy retired in 1995, the cost per day for each woman was \$50, and 65 percent of the women completed their goals within a year of entering Our Hope. Moreover, 2 years after leaving the program, 85 percent of that number was still leading healthy lives.

Even in retirement, Nancy said that she was still interested in working more directly with women who were going through substance abuse treatment, especially helping them find adequate health care for their children, day care, and all the factors that are such a fundamental part of recovery. Thinking about her grandmother, Jeannette Hinsdill Palmer, Nancy felt that she had come “full cycle about [Grand Rapids], which [she] loved so much. She added:

I love the Heritage Hill area, and I would like to see more adequate environmental housing. . . . While working at Our Hope, we were one of the first to put a great deal of focus on physical fitness, health care, [and] bringing in teachers who talked physical health as well as emotional health. . . . That is something now, as I go on into the Golden Years, I think I am even more enthusiastic about; the importance of wellness, physical activity, and healthy eating patterns.

Finally, while reflecting on how WWII changed the lives of women, Nancy had this to say:

Rosie the Riveter really came into the fore, and women who never thought of working outside of the home within a period of 3 – 4 years were assuming that was their role. Granted, that as the war ended those that were married went back into the home. I think it refocused many of us into a more expanded horizon in the community than we would have had without the war.

Other Resources:

<http://obits.mlive.com/obituaries/grandrapids/obituary.aspx?pid=151240114>