

Virgilia R. Wade

Birth: September 25, 1916

Death: May 20, 2008

Father: C. C. Wade

Mother: Mamie Wade

Virgilia R. Wade was born in San Marcos, TX, half way between Austin and San Antonio. She was the oldest of four girls.

After high school, Virgilia attended a “small teacher college” and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree. She then taught elementary school for a “number of years.” The first year was in a “little tiny town called La Sara, [TX].” The last place she taught, which occurred during WWII, was in Mac Ogdoches, TX. Virgilia then moved to Orange, TX, where she had secured a supervisor of shipbuilding position. She checked blue prints against allowance lists.

After WWII, Virgilia applied to Northwestern University, in Chicago, in the Drama Department. After graduating, she moved to Indianola, Iowa, where she taught speech at Simpson College for 3 years. Then, she moved back home to attend University of Texas, which was only 3 miles away. At that time the United States was involved in the Korean War. Virgilia had run out of money, so when she was offered a job in the Houston Public Assistance Department, she took it. Within a short time, she had learned that college scholarships in social work were available if she were in the Child Welfare Department in Beaumont, TX. So she transferred there and was soon choosing which school she wanted to attend. She chose New York School of Social Work at Columbia, New York City, because she could go to “all the Broadway plays.” Virgilia not only attended Broadway plays but also earned her master’s degree in Social Work.

After graduating from Columbia, Virgilia’s first job was in Toledo, OH, in a mental health facility. She worked there for 2 years before moving to Grand Rapids, MI, in 1963. Virgilia said she moved to Grand Rapids because of its national reputation in mental health services. She was particularly impressed with the Grand Rapids Child Guidance Clinic, which had been opened for only a few years at the time. She shortly became the director of the Preschool Child Development Program, a position she held until 1983.

After her retirement in 1983, Virgilia became more involved in the politics of child care on both the local and state levels. Because she knew so many people who worked in social services, Virgilia was able to advocate for children in such organizations as Aid to Dependent Children, Health and Human Services, and a grassroots group called the Day Policy Board in Lansing, MI. She was also a member of the Michigan League for Human Services. Her work with George Heartwell, the future mayor of Grand Rapids, to help the local homeless population eventually led to the founding of the organization called The Emergency Shelter.

Virgilia became involved in other organizations, so she could learn about “what was happening in the world.” These organizations included the Americans for Democratic Action, Current Affairs Committee of the Michigan League for Human Services, and the Institute for Global Education. She was also part of a discussion group, Politics of Meaning, started by George Heartwell. This assembly eventually became known as the Fair Trade Group. Last, Virgilia belonged to two poetry groups at Fountain Street Church.

In 1991 Virgilia was honored with the YWCA Tribute Award. Finally, Virgilia said she was never interested in getting married. She was only interested in getting out of San Marcos, which she described as “. . . that small, suffocating town. . . .” She not only achieved her goal of getting out of San Marcos, but also composed an important and active life, campaigning for children and the world in which they live.

Other Resources:

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