

Phyllis McDowell

I'm certain many of you fondly remember Phyllis McDowell. For those of you who've never met her, you are sorely missing out. Phyllis is now 93 and resides in Chester, CT. (Here is a picture of her at her home at Chester Village taken in 2014.)



Much of this story of Phyllis is partly paraphrased from references I found by Googling her. One in Zip 06 in Sept. 2014, one in the New Haven Independent in Feb. 2020 and the last on the Middlesex County Community Foundation website.

Phyllis has been a friend of my family starting from childhood where I spent countless hours joyfully playing tennis with her four daughters on their home court in North Haven which was in walking distance to my home. As an aside, that same court was a training (or should I say battle ground for the two daughters of another GCNH member Kathy Wagner.). Phyllis also carpooled me home from Foote School and dancing school and now, in the present day I'm sad to say my only contact with her is when I deliver a GCNH holiday arrangement to her home in Chester.

HISTORY

Phyllis is the daughter of Arthur and Kathryn Murray, the pioneer entrepreneurs of nationally franchised dance studios. A graduate of Sarah Lawrence College, she majored in psychology. Through dance she met her husband Ted McDowell and together they raised four beautiful, brilliant and delightful daughters, Katy, (from whom I gathered some information for this talk), Martha, Meg and Duby, who you may have seen in her past career as a television news personality in Connecticut. This photo was taken in February of 2020.



I was unable to unearth much information on Phyllis's contributions to the Garden Club however her daughter Katie told me that she was involved in the Long Wharf Nature Preserve project which was done in collaboration with the Yale School of Forestry.

PIONEERING VOLUNTEER and COMMUNITY ACTIVIST

Phyllis's "volunteer career" began back in the 60s in New Haven. She would humbly and quietly tell you she started her career in volunteerism because she had nothing to do. She just had too much time on her hands and too much energy to waste. She believes that helping others – and everything around you – is an obligation and a privilege.

Volunteering to work with mental health patients, Phyllis recalls, was not what well-bred women of her generation were supposed to be doing. They were, she said, supposed to be getting married and then turn to appropriate activities like giving dinner parties.



She founded Fellowship Club which later became Fellowship Place and is an organization the GCNH has partnered with over the years. It went on to become highly recognized for its pioneering ways of treating mental health patients through art therapy, vocational training and by fostering an open and welcoming environment for socializing. There were, very few facilities of its kind at the time. Most state funding went to three large state psychiatric facilities, two of which at the time had since been closed. Mental health patients living within the community had very few places to turn for continuing support. "We were a vibrant center for returned mental patients."

Phyllis said that what made it welcoming and beneficial to its members was a simple rule that doesn't come from a complicated psychology manual. "We treated people as they wanted to be treated - courteously"

Her efforts resulted in her being nominated for the Service Before Self Honors from the Congressional Medal of Honor foundation. Phyllis served on the board for much of Fellowship Place's 60+ years and is now listed as an Honorary Director and Founder. The significant thing about her life is how hard she has worked to provide advantages for others dedicating herself to improving the lot of those outside the mainstream.



She later set her sights on another avenue to channel her passions and enthusiasm - the environment. For more than 60 years, Phyllis has spent her summers at her house in Fenwick. Inspired by the beauty of Middlesex County and still believing that we can all make a difference, she established the PHYLLIS M. MCDOWELL FUND, a Field of Interest Endowed Fund, through the Middlesex County Community Foundation to ensure that the region's natural resources are enhanced, not diminished, and that Middlesex County remains a unique area to enjoy – and to live, work, play and treasure. Now and forever.