

Nancy Seiberling: A Tribute

Nancy Seiberling, whose vision and energy were preeminent among Project GREEN's founding mothers, died on January 12, 2015, at the age of 97. A Minnesotan by birth who grew up in Massachusetts (and never lost her Eastern "aah"), Nancy studied art history at Wellesley and therein found her lifelong passion. After graduation, she worked at the Toledo Museum of Art, where she met Frank Seiberling Jr., the supervisor of art education. They were married in 1941 and moved to Iowa City with their four children in 1959, when Frank became director of the School of Art and Art History at the university. Nancy's spectacular gardens, surrounding their house in the countryside, starred in several Project GREEN tours and were always open to visitors drawn by their glorious reputation. She and Frank became connoisseurs of tree peonies; when she moved into town after Frank's death, Nancy brought with her the extraordinary 'Joseph Rock' tree peony that still blooms outside her former home. (Nancy once offered to Gail Zlatnik a tree peony that, she said, wasn't doing well in her own yard. Gail said she'd be out shortly to dig it up—and discovered that Nancy had already left it, in an old bushel basket, in Gail's driveway. Nancy was generous with plants as well as with her time and expertise!)

The memories of those who worked with Nancy always note the enthusiasm and vigor she contributed to the projects she undertook. Melanie Hauptert remembers Nancy "working like a Trojan" with her shovel and knife in a hosta-digging effort. "She didn't stop that day until the rest of us, aged thirty to forty years, had quit, exhausted. She was much older, but, setting her usual example of ageless grace, she out-worked us all." She led a team of volunteers as they trimmed the Gretchen Harshbarger-designed plantings on Iowa Avenue, and Nancy's "enthusiasm and work ethic made the project enjoyable for us all," says Melanie. "As far as Nancy was concerned, the opportunity to help in community beautification was 'lovely' and 'fantastic.' She approached all of life with an exuberance and class that set a high standard for the rest of us."

Mary Gantz notes that she herself, "and countless others, witnessed Nancy putting her arms around a tree with the words 'Isn't this just the most magnificent tree you have ever seen?' (especially if that tree happened to be a recalcitrant nuisance in its location!!," Mary adds). Mary too recalls Nancy's "energy and drive at directing a combination of city crews and community volunteers cleaning up the riverbank along Rocky Shore Drive. Her positive and inclusive nature made you feel as though you were the most important cog in the entire effort." One of Nancy's stratagems for recruiting volunteers, Gail Zlatnik remembers, was her opening statement: "I just knew you'd want to be included in this." Few could resist that appeal!



Nancy's son Franklin has a special memory of his gardening mother. "Off around a corner near a shed," he writes, "Nancy had a small garden that likely went unnoticed by most people because of its size and unpretentious planting. It was a wildflower garden, and she weeded carefully between the many little treasures she intended to cultivate. Intruding grasses or broadleaves, although they were also wild, were dug up by their roots so as not to impede the progress of those plants she deemed worthy. I would sometimes stand off to the side and talk to her as she weeded, and she would tell me the Latin names for a few of the tiny inhabitants of that bed. Some, I thought, were too small to merit bothering about. Mum found value in small things and cultivated them, often in unseen ways that made sense to her even if they did not matter to others."

Nancy believed that the best time in a woman's life was after age fifty, and her accomplishments surely illustrate that: not only did she create Project GREEN's name and acronym, with Gretchen Harshbarger, and shape our guiding philosophy, but she chaired the Steering Committee for ten years ("No one should head an organization longer than that"), and became a founder of the Johnson County Trust (now the Bur Oak Land Trust). Even as her memory began to fail, she found what she felt was a suitable activity for her changing abilities—mending—as she sat near the windows of her Iowa City home. In her last years at that home, she always welcomed visitors as if they were eagerly expected, creating for her a perfect day. Her undaunted graciousness and smile persisted even as her memory of names faded.

An Iowa City woman who knew Nancy just slightly once remarked, "Nancy Seiberling—she's my hero." So she was, and so she remains, for many of us.

Franklin Seiberling maintains Nancy's own website, which includes an extended history, photographs, and descriptions of his mother's many accomplishments, at www.nancyseiberling.org.