BETTY ANN PTACEK, BS
by Jane Kennedy and Joyce Billings

Betty Ptacek (nee Beatrice Ann Hahn) was born on June 13, 1936, in Oacoma, South Dakota, and died on June 25, 2024, at age 88, in Fitchburg, Wisconsin, at Agrace Hospice Care. Joyce Billings and Jane Kennedy were assisted by Thom Garretson, Margo Ptacek, Don Schnitzler, Diane Wolf, Gretchen Blau, Mei Chen, Joyce Gottschalk, Jane Ulmer, Barb Altmann and other friends in writing about Betty.

Common themes in Betty's life include respect for people of all ages, races, genders and religions, a burning curiosity about the world we live in, a desire to preserve the earth and its inhabitants, an intellectual focus on the "big questions," and activism starting with herself. She was known as a community organizer, bringing people together for worthy causes.

Betty graduated from Chamberlain High School in Chamberlain, SD, in 1953. She attended Mount Marty College in Yankton, SD, graduating in 1958 with a bachelor of science degree. Betty often said that this was a pivotal time in her life and is where she "learned to think." She always praised the nuns at her college for instilling the ideas of social justice and action.

After completing her degree, Betty worked as a medical technician in New York and Milwaukee. In 1958, while working at St. Joseph's Hospital in Milwaukee, Betty met Dr. Louis Ptacek on a blind date. Louie proposed to Betty on the second date. After just 2 dates, Betty wisely said no, but they continued dating. Eventually, when Louie proposed again several months later, Betty said yes. In 1959, Betty married Dr. Louis J. Ptacek (1929-2006), longtime Marshfield medical researcher and pediatric neurologist who contributed to the fields of genetics and neuroscience. In 1965, the couple moved to Marshfield where they raised their five children.

Betty threw herself into community projects and was very involved in supporting the clinic, education, business, church projects, land preservation and local governance. She, along with three other women, became owners and operators of the Brass Lantern Bookshop, opened at 338 South Central Avenue downtown Marshfield, moving 2 years later to the old clinic building on 2nd Street.

In 1995, Betty received the Paul Harris Community Service Award from the Marshfield Noon Rotary Club in recognition of her "exemplary service to the community." At that time, she had been a member of the City Council for six years, executive director of Marshfield Area United Way, a member of the UW Marshfield Center Foundation Board, Marshfield Leadership Board, Columbus High School Board, Marshfield Area Community Foundation Board, a member of the Marshfield Woodlands Preservation Committee, a member of the Wood County Medical Alliance, and a St. Vincent de Paul volunteer, organizing donated books.



Betty Ptacek

Betty and Louie Ptacek, along with other students' parents, established an annual Ski Swap at Columbus High School in 1979. Within one year, the ski swap had grown into a weekend-long celebration. Each year the organizers would gather in the Ptacek's basement to make sauerkraut, which was served at the event, today's popular fundraiser, Alpine Holiday.

Betty believed strongly in the democratic process and in citizens' responsibility to actively participate. Betty served on the State of Wisconsin Judicial Commission (1985-1988). She was a member of Marshfield's League of Women Voters. She also was a member of U.S. Rep. David Obey's Better Way Club and helped bring major speakers to central Wisconsin (including former President Jimmy Carter to Wausau in 1979 and musician and activist Harry Belafonte in 1987). She worked on election campaigns for many candidates over the years, sponsoring fundraisers, writing letters, registering voters, participating in marches, and volunteering countless hours to candidates and causes that matched her values.

Curiosity was one of Betty's signature traits. If you were to spend a week with Betty, you might (Betty did all of these) go to see the family of great horned owls she had discovered nesting in a tree, then to a university lecture given by a noted linguist on the origins of Ebonics, followed by participating in a research study of northern right whales, compiling data from watch points and sending them to the investigator. You might wander through Olbrich Gardens, tour Epic company, and visit a Buddhist monastery, write a chapter of your memoir with her writing group or participate in the Wom-

en's March. You could attend a political fundraiser, discuss the current book for the Wisconsin Book Read, or travel with the theater department of UW Marshfield to NYC to see Broadway productions and explore the Metropolitan Museum of Art. You might accompany her to see a 94-year-old friend who could no longer get out, travel to Quebec or to the Grand Canyon with friends through Road Scholars or dash to Lake Pepin to see the migrating swans.

Betty was deeply concerned about the environment, about preserving nature. She and Louie started right here at home in Marshfield. They were instrumental in acquiring the property abutting the UW Marshfield Campus and Arboretum to the south. The owners wanted to sell but only as a package with the empty lots to the east. Fearing that development would destroy the chance of adding the wooded area to the existing Arboretum, a group of citizens, including the Ptaceks, the Hansens and others who were great supporters of the UW and wanted to save that wooded area for public use, decided to buy that land and gift it to the UW. The remainder of the land became the Woodsview Condo Association property. Betty loved nature and took walks outdoors as often as possible. She could be seen on her walks carrying a bag and picking up any litter she encountered, no matter where she was hiking. She worked for years during her winters in Florida, to help with preservation of northern right whales through participation in a research study. In Wisconsin she took a great interest in the crane projects. She often participated in guided bird watching outings in Wisconsin and Florida. Betty spent a great deal of volunteer time as a Friend of the Mead Wildlife Area. She gave tours to students and other groups at the Mead and encouraged her friends to join.

Education was very important to Betty. She posted this quote on her FB page: "We should measure the prosperity of a nation not by the number of millionaires, but by the absence of poverty, the prevalence of health, the efficiency of the public schools, and the number of people who can and do read worthwhile books." (W.E.B. DuBois). She was a great supporter of UW Marshfield and of the whole UW-System. Betty served on the UW-Colleges Board of Visitors from 1985 to 1992. All five of her children attended UW and went on to worthwhile careers and lives. Betty and her husband, Louie, sponsored a need-based college scholarship at Marquette for Marshfield area residents. They also sponsored scholarships at UW Marshfield. Betty was a long-time member and enthusiastic participant in Kathy Campbell's book group. She served on the School Board at Columbus High School. Betty organized used book sales for the community, held at various venues. She would round up her friends to sort, organize, and price the books, and all proceeds went for scholarships or other worthy causes. She was a member of the Literacy Council and actively recruited others to work on the Literacy Council. Even in the last week of her life, Betty was recommending book titles for her friends to read. Marshfield Clinic greatly benefited from Betty's support. At the time she and Louie moved to Marshfield, Marshfield Clinic was decidedly patriarchal. Physicians' wives who were health care professionals, such as Betty and many others, were not allowed to work at the Clinic. Betty and her friends took a lot of these women under their wings, introduced them to the community, and helped them become involved in community activities. In this way, she greatly helped the Clinic's physician recruiting efforts. The community benefited from this group of highly intelligent and educated women. Gretchen Blau, one of these women, stated, "For me personally, she was an instigator for community action and persuaded me to serve on the city's Parks and Forestry Committee. Marshfield became a Tree City USA, by adopting a terrace tree-planting program, still in existence." Likewise, Joyce Billings stated, "I only know that the two of them (Marilyn Hardacre and Betty Ptacek) were responsible for my getting involved in MAC-CI and the Community Foundation." By involving her talented friends through kind and gentle persuasion, Betty's impact was magnified. She was a humble and self-effacing person herself and did not seek the limelight but acted as a catalyst to make things happen.

Betty's interesting conversational style was to ask questions. She would introduce a topic and then ask each person in the group their opinion. Betty loved contemplating the "big questions." She started a philosophy group that lasted several years just to read and discuss these things. At Chautauqua in New York, she eagerly attended the lectures and participated in discussions on moral and philosophical issues, particularly as they related to current events or the environment. Even in the last month of her life, from her hospice bed, she was posing questions to her friends such as: What is love? and Why are some people cruel? She posted these questions followed by a quote from Neil deGrasse Tyson on FB: What is life all about? Why are we here? "What fascinates me is that hardly anyone is wondering what we're doing on this planet. Most people have accepted the work- eat- entertainment-sleep cycle and have no desire to have a deeper understanding of our purpose in this universe." Betty was one person who pursued that deeper under-

standing.

Betty's legacy can be seen in the lives of the many people she touched. Her daughter, Margo, summed it up perfectly in a recent Facebook post in which she showed a video of a murmuration of starlings: "Oh, how my mother would have loved this! Like me, she found the idea of murmurations (huge flock of starlings that twist and swirl in the sky) entrancing. And we often talked about how overwhelming the problems of the world are- how one person can't preserve democracy (or the environment, etc.) on their own. So, we both decided that we would try our best to make the world better in whatever small ways we could, that we would work within our small spheres of influence- the seven starlings closest to us, one could say. If enough people do this, we can make the world a better place and we might be able to defeat the forces of bigotry, greed, violence, and ignorance." Those of us who were fortunate to fall into Betty Ptacek's orbit during her life will always be grateful for the love and kindness which she radiated, the talents she possessed and the many gifts she shared.