

Beatrice Ann “Betty” Ptacek

This week we are happy to name Beatrice Ann “Betty” Ptacek as the 144th inductee in Marshfield’s 150: Heroes and Leaders, Past and Present register. Betty Ptacek was nominated by Joyce Billings and Jane Kennedy.

Betty Ptacek was born Beatrice Ann Hahn on June 13, 1936, in Oacoma, SD, and died on June 25, 2024, at age 88, in Fitchburg.

Common themes in Betty’s life include a 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 high school in Chamberlain, SD, in 1953. She attended Mount Marty College in Yankton, SD, graduating in 1958 with a bachelor’s 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. While working in Milwaukee at St. Joseph’s Hospital, Betty met Louis Ptacek on a blind date. He proposed on their second date. Betty wisely said no, but they continued dating, and when Louie proposed again several months later, she said yes. In 1959, Betty married Dr. Louis J. Ptacek, longtime Marshfield medical researcher and pediatric neurologist who contributed to the fields of genetics and neuroscience. In 1965, they 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 S. Central Avenue in downtown Marshfield.

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/Wood County 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 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 Ptacek's basement to make sauerkraut, which was served at the event, known today as the 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 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.

Betty was deeply concerned about the environment and about preserving nature. She and Louie, along with the Hansens and others were instrumental in acquiring the property abutting the UW Marshfield Campus and Arboretum. Once purchased, the wooded land was gifted to the UW and the remainder of the land became the Woodsvieview Condo Association property. Betty frequently took walks outdoors. She could be seen on her walks carrying a bag and picking up any litter she encountered, no matter where she was hiking. Betty spent a great deal of volunteer time as a Friend of the Mead Wildlife Area where she gave tours to students and other groups, and encouraged her friends to join

Education was very important to Betty. 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.

Betty and her husband sponsored a need-based college scholarship at Marquette for Marshfield area residents. They also sponsored scholarships at UW Marshfield. Betty served on the school board at Columbus High School. She organized used book sales for the community. 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.

Marshfield Clinic and the community benefited from Betty's support. At the time she and Louie moved to Marshfield, the Clinic was decidedly patriarchal. Physicians' wives who were health care professionals, such as Betty, were not allowed to work at the Clinic. Betty and her friends took these women under their wings, introduced them to the community,

and helped them become involved in community activities. In this way, she helped the Clinic in its physician recruitment efforts, and the community benefited from this group of talented, highly intelligent and motivated women. Gretchen Blau, one of these women, stated, "For me personally, Betty 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." 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. She eagerly attended lectures and participated in discussions on moral and philosophical issues, particularly as they related to current events or the environment.

Betty's legacy can be seen in the lives of the many people she touched. Those of us who were fortunate to fall into the orbit of Betty Ptacek 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.