Someone to reckon with

Behind the soft-spoken demure and grandmotherly looks, Sheila Richter is the one to have on your side when fighting for a cause. The roots of her community-oriented activism began in the Grove. As a young mother with two daughters in the late ‘60s, she saw the need for a community playground. The Richters, along with many neighbors, pooled their money for swings and slides and installed them in the commons area behind their house. There were lots of kids and dogs in the neighborhood and they soon outgrew the space. Longtime Grove residents who mobilized for a new park included the Dworkin, Davis, Andre, Tang, Rasmussen and other families. The mothers met with a University vice-president and negotiated a $1/year lease between Falcon Heights and the University to use the open fields where 1666 Coffman and the Grove park now exist. The families organized to remove rocks and seed the area. They dug up the cemented equipment from the commons, carried it to the park, and re-cemented it into place. Over time, the city replaced the equipment and new generations of kids enjoy the benefits of what a small, committed group of people accomplished.

More recently, Sheila and her husband, Ket, a professor of economics, helped spearhead the relocation efforts of the soccer stadium planned next to 1666 Coffman and behind Folwell Avenue. When residents were notified of the University’s application to build the Elizabeth Lyle Robbie Soccer Stadium, Sheila started calling people and began building a case for relocation. She spoke to many households in the Grove and St. Anthony Park. She and Ket joined others in paying for aerial photos of the planned site to show residents the scale of the stadium. Concerned neighbors got on the bandwagon and hired a lawyer and helped with documentation sent to each Regent. They contacted all the Regents, as well as the county commissioner, the St. Paul mayor, state legislators, city officials, and the media.

“It was a good education in where political power lies and how to access it,” said Sheila.

“The neighborhoods worked hard and were successful using the resources available to us. We had incredible leadership support from Grove residents Sue Gehrz and Sue Hoyt, Falcon Heights mayor and city manager.”

Politics and diplomacy are a way of life for Sheila having grown up around the world with a father in the Foreign Service. Born in Panama, her family

continued on back
moved in 1934 to Romania where she entered first grade in a French school. By third grade she was in an American international school in Santiago, Chile. The diversity of the overseas education and in the U.S. at a progressive Oregon school where they raised chickens to a large urban high school in Washington, D.C., nurtured her belief she was “born to be a teacher.” When a high school counselor told her she’d never get into Swarthmore, she revealed her true grit. This year Sheila attended her 50th anniversary Swarthmore reunion.

She met Ket in her first week at college. They married the week after college graduation and went around the world in 1958 while her father was working in Afghanistan. With his gift of airline tickets and on borrowed money, they visited India, Iran, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Hong Kong and Japan. Sheila got her masters in education at Harvard and began her teaching career working with children in both gifted and special education programs. It wasn’t until age 50, Sheila taught “normal” kids as a preschool teacher in St. Anthony Park. A lifelong learner, Sheila took courses at the University and received her preschool teaching license. Incorporating many early childhood philosophies, the preschool became a center of discovery where children explored their world and learned to solve problems. She also made the preschool in the UCC church into a parent-owned cooperative. It was an opportunity to build community by connecting parents for the children’s sake. For 20 years, she knew whole families of sisters and brothers as preschoolers and still recognizes traits in the students a decade later. After retiring as “the oldest preschool teacher in the Twin Cities,” she misses the kids and their energy. Describing her days now as lazy, Sheila continues to serve her community in the Neighbors for Peace movement, as a vice-chair on the Bugle board, a volunteer for homeless shelters and a former board member for the Block Nurse program. She’s served as a Grove officer in several capacities and terms and as a block captain. Her roots are deep in this community and we’ve all benefited from Sheila’s indomitable spirit.

Grove loses $100,000 for trolley path

By George Weiblen

The City of Falcon Heights received a grant from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to develop the path along the abandoned trolley line from the Lauderdale Nature Area to Coffman Avenue. The city and the DNR recognized the natural and recreational significance of the area and its potential as a pedestrian link to local parks, the nature area, the University and the proposed Bell Museum relocation on the corner of Larpenteur and Cleveland avenues. The trolley path is part of the Grove commons and the city was willing to assume responsibility for upkeep as well as liability in return for right-of-way along a public path. A volunteer task force of Grove homeowners including myself, Tony Dean, Susan Harding, Ruth Donhowe, Michelle Hallaway, Jerry Starkey, Margaret Davis, Irving Fang and Park Commissioner Denise Deen, met monthly during the fall of 2003 to voice concerns and discuss design plans with the city liaison, Bill Maertz. The task force voted to submit a design to homeowners for the development of a gravel path and the restoration of native vegetation. Although most homeowners were in favor of improving the path, Susan Weinberg, director of the University Real Estate Office (REO), required unanimous approval by all homeowners bordering the affected section of the trolley line for the project to proceed. Grove members familiar with faculty meetings will not be surprised to learn that the community failed to speak with one voice.

It isn’t obvious, at least to this task force member, where the REO has the authority to mandate such an improbable consensus regarding the management of the commons. City Hall eventually abandoned the project and the Grove lost more than $100,000 in funding, leaving important concerns about erosion, visibility, invasive plants, habitat quality and safety unaddressed.

Kudos to:

Steve Taft and Susan Hoyt for hosting National Night Out in the Grove in August. Their home has been the meeting spot for neighbors, fire trucks and police cars for many years.


Joe Massey, the new vice-chancellor for academic affairs at Crookston. He previously was head of the department of wood and paper science on the St. Paul campus and assistant vice provost for faculty development.

Pauline Boss, a professor in the College of Human Ecology (CHE), was honored on July 23 by two New York City labor unions for her work helping family members and coworkers of victims cope with loss from the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. Pauline is the author of Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief. CHE co-sponsored the event and raised more than $100,000 toward an endowed chair in family stress and resilience. The chair will help carry on Pauline’s groundbreaking work and expertise in ambiguous loss after she retires in 2005.

Robin Wright, associate dean for faculty and academic affairs, convened a faculty task force to review the College of Biological Sciences (CBS) curriculum. Wright came to CBS for the opportunity to reform biology education and possibly create a model curriculum. CBS is one of the few schools in the U.S. devoted to biological sciences and the University is one of few large public universities that requires biology for all undergraduates.

University Grove Newsletter Board

President Mike Homerski: misms2117@comcast.net

Vice-president Kristen Swanson: bswanson@srti.org

Sec./Treasurer Jinny Massey: vkm22780@flash.net

Editor Karen Kloser: kloese004@umn.edu

The University Grove News is published three times a year in February, June and October.

www.umn.edu/ugrove