

INDOMITABLE LADY

Teacher, Writer, Civic Leader Turns 100

By Rebecca Patrick

I found a kindred spirit in Fort Wayne native Betty Stein when I was setting up our interview.

First, she threatened to “ply me with M&M’s” if I visited.

Then she declared she was not a morning person.

Her polite but stern phone greeting also warned off salespeople.

And all flowing from a voice so full of vigor, enthusiasm and refinement.

Our interview took place on the 75th anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor – an occasion Betty remembers well – and just a few days before her 100th birthday celebration.

Once we had properly chatted, I sincerely wished this amazing woman had been my English teacher or mentor. I also told a friend I could only hope to have half her memory or be half that sharp when I retire.

Family affairs

Betty has lived in Fort Wayne nearly all her life. Her physician father and “almost nurse” mother (she met her husband and “bingo!”) were from Baltimore and came to the area for his job offer.

“I was very fortunate. I had absolutely marvelous parents and a brother two years older. They took us to concerts, to the opera. We went to museums,” she shares, which ignited her lifelong passion for the arts.

“We were given every opportunity by two fine people.”

During the Great Depression, Betty graduated at age 20 from Ohio State University with a bachelor’s degree in social administration. She had started out in journalism school but switched majors after the first assignment – “going out to solicit an ad” – wasn’t up her alley.

Betty met her husband, Curtis, who was from Germany. The young couple waited until his parents escaped their homeland and



Retired schoolteacher Betty Stein was honored in May 2016 for all she has done for students in Fort Wayne Community Schools and the middle school speech program (*The News-Sentinel photo*).

arrived here in 1939 before they got married. The following year his job opportunity took them to Dallas.

On December 7, 1941, they had called the police after noticing the trunk of their car had been jimmied and the spare tire stolen.

“We were standing out back with cops when over their car radio we heard that the Japanese had just bombed Pearl Harbor. We are at war. I thought, ‘They’ve made a mistake and we will wipe them out in two to three weeks.’ Little did I know ... Wow!”

Soon Curtis was off to fight in the war. Then Betty’s mother died. She also decided that her little boy needed a father figure – her father. So she went back home to Fort Wayne.

Her husband returned there after finishing up his military service and went into business with his dad. That business is Stein Ad Promotions, which is run today by Betty’s son and granddaughter. She also has a daughter, another grandchild, two step-grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Teaching and writing

Betty was in her early 40s when she “needed to think” and began studies at the University of Saint Francis. One of the sisters there steered her in the teaching direction. She completed a master’s degree in education

with certification in social studies and English.

On the very day she finished, there was an opening at Fairfield Junior High within Fort Wayne Community Schools. Betty took the post even though she really wanted to teach high school. She ended up “loving the place” and stayed for 13 years, eventually chairing both the English and social studies departments.

Betty was then curriculum coordinator at Memorial Park Middle School and has served as a consultant since her 1982 retirement. She currently goes there every Tuesday to work on the newsletter and counsel students.

Reflecting, Betty offers: “I most loved getting kids excited about learning. Getting kids to look around them and seeing the world.

“I took them to a naturalization service ... and they were so affected by the people who were so thrilled with getting their citizenship. They learned more that day than they would have six weeks with a textbook. Seeing what American citizenship meant to people. With things like this, how can you not love teaching?”

Writing has always held a special place in Betty’s heart and she was editor of her high school newspaper.

She started freelancing at *The News-Sentinel* in the early 1980s when an editor came to visit Memorial Park Middle School for enrollment consideration for his daughter; the two hit it off.

“There has to be time to teach the kids the liberal arts, the visual arts, the fine arts. I worry they are forgetting.”

“He asked me if I would like to write a column for him. So I wrote a column on Fort Wayne women I thought he should know about. And he asked me to write another column. And eventually I was writing a daily history column, a weekly column – and I’m still there!”

“Every Saturday night I have a book column and every other Tuesday I have a whatever-I-want column, which sometimes is a quiz.”

And these quizzes are not for the faint of heart. She will test your literature prowess, grammar recall or general arts knowledge.

Community service and thrills

Betty is just as thorough with her many civic endeavors. Among them: She was on the city’s Alcohol Beverage Commission for two decades, including time as the chair.

“I used to teach kids: ‘It’s your government – help support it.’ And there I was putting my money where my mouth was,” she notes.

“I urge people to do the same. It’s very worthwhile, and you feel like you are giving back a little bit. Do I sound like Pollyanna?” she wonders. After a pause, she decides: “It is

what people should do!”

Two absolute “thrills” that have happened to Betty in the last few years are indicative of her mark in her community. At age 97, she received a Doctor of Humane Letters from the University of Saint Francis. “That was the culmination,” she exclaims.

For all 40 years of the Fort Wayne Middle School Speech Contest, Betty has served as master of ceremonies. In May 2016, the traveling trophy was named in her honor.

“Oh, I was absolutely floored! I was shocked,” she says. “Fort Wayne Community Schools doesn’t do things like that. It was a marvelous gift to me.”

Words of wisdom

Betty doesn’t know the keys to her long life, but says it “ain’t in the genes” (her mom died in her late 60s; her father was nearly 75). She smoked until 1973, but she does “live a life of moderation. Moderation in all things.”

Perhaps it comes down to pure enjoyment of what’s in front of her.

“I loved teaching. I loved writing. My

father loved practicing medicine,” she begins. “I can’t imagine not loving what you are doing. And if you aren’t loving it, try to find something that you thoroughly enjoy getting up in the morning for.”

Drinking a cup of good tea, writing, sitting down with a good book. These are all elements of a great day for Betty. She also cherishes talking to her children and grandchildren, being with friends and going out to eat – and “just being here!”

Betty is quick to recognize she’s been blessed. “I still have a mind ... I’m active – thank God!”

The walker she uses doesn’t stop her from making the rounds in the least.

“Emily Webb in (the play) *Our Town* asks, ‘Does anyone ever live every, every moment.’ I think it’s such a shame when we don’t,” Betty observes. “We don’t look around. We don’t see the beauty that’s here. We don’t see the needs that are here and don’t care.

“Life is wonderful and it’s so much better when you live it!”



Past Winners

- 2016: Lisa Price, J.D., KAR Auction Services, Inc.
- 2015: Anita Buntin, Indiana Farm Bureau Insurance Company and LaVonne Cate, Federal Home Loan Bank of Indianapolis
- 2014: Charles Young, hhgregg
- 2013: Jill Lehman, SPHR, Ontario Systems
- 2012: Melissa Greenwell, The Finish Line

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