

The Disability Community Remembers
The Life of Maryann Mahaffey
Tuesday, October 24, 2006
3:00 - 5:00 p.m.
Detroit City Council Auditorium

Remembering Maryann Mahaffey

Disability activist Sara Gleicher says it best: Maryann Mahaffey was a dynamo.

Sara was a teenager when she first met Maryann, who hired Sara's father as her public relations adviser. Years later, they crossed paths again. Sara went back to Wayne State University for a masters degree in social work, and Maryann ended up as one of her professors. Then she found herself working for the Detroit City Council member. Eventually she became Maryann's chief of staff.

"I was totally wowed and awed by her," Sara said. "She was immensely popular with Detroiters, went absolutely everywhere, spoke from the heart with sincerity and passion and never backed down from a fight when it involved human rights, civil rights and justice issues."

The legacy that Maryann Mahaffey left Michigan's disability community is so wide reaching that it's impossible to detail. Although her greatest impact was close to home in the city she chose to serve for most of her life, her actions also influenced policy and decisions in the county, in the state and beyond.

"Every Detroiters with disabilities who rides an accessible city bus and pays a reasonable fare has Maryann to thank. Every person who enters city buildings through wheelchair-friendly doors knows that it was her efforts that brought the city into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. As president of the City Council, Maryann's energy and passion gave birth to a long list of initiatives that directly and indirectly have enhanced the lives of people with disabilities.

Her involvement with the disability community was long and rich. Maryann worked with the United Cerebral Palsy foundation long before she was even transplanted to Detroit from Iowa. And she kept on as a trailblazer, launching marriage counseling services when others balked at the notion of people with disabilities even getting married, ordering politicians to listen -- really listen -- to the people they served and refusing to accept even the smallest step back when it came to people's rights.

"Every day she put into practice her beliefs in individual worth, dignity and potential," said Sara. On the City Council, Maryann constantly advocated for universal services and accessible facilities. She formed the Detroit Disability Advisory Task force to the City Council.

Sara recalled Maryann's doggedness in making sure things got done.

"She made daily inquiries of the Public Works Department for weeks on end, asking if they'd put in curb cuts to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act," Sara explained. "Daily she received the response, 'No, not yet.'"

"This went on for at least four months," Sara continued. "Then, finally one day, they were able to say that 'yes,' they were putting in the curb cuts. There was absolute jubilation on Maryann's face."

Activist Tommy Meadows first met Maryann more than 32 years ago during his work with the Consumer Task Force for United Cerebral Palsy. But his admiration of her, which was already considerable, jumped in 1999 during a disability march.

"We held a protest march from The Arc Detroit to what was then the City-County Building. We wanted to get the city council aware that it didn't even have transitional plans for implementing the Americans with Disabilities Act," Meadows recalled. "This is the same city council that, 20 years earlier, had a building with only one entrance for people in wheelchairs. "She was the only councilperson who came out to talk to our group," added Meadows, who recently became vice president of The Arc Detroit's board of directors. "And it was a real two-way conversation. I learned from Maryann that it's important to lead but it's also important to listen."

A few months after the protest march, Maryann introduced a resolution creating The Detroit Disability Advisory Task force to the City Council to collect information and make recommendations to the city council. Meadows is serving his second term as its chairman.

Maryann's biggest gifts to the city lie in the public policy initiatives she spearheaded on behalf of not only people with disabilities, but also seniors, children, women, workers and homeowners as well as the homeless. But she also was a pivotal force in more personal, behind-the-scenes moments. Long before the word "empowerment" entered our vocabulary, she tracked down sources of help for people with disabilities struggling to keep up with their electric bills, guided Detroiters who thought home owning was forever beyond their reach, advocated for funding for people with great needs but few resources.

Like the old "teach them to fish" story, she directed these people toward the assistance they needed, taught them to help themselves then motivated people to pick up the banner and join grassroots efforts to improve Detroit. Maryann's daughter followed in her footsteps: Susan Dooha is executive director of the Center for Independence of the Disabled New York, or CIDNY.

"Maryann was a long-time friend of The Arc Detroit, but her activism went far beyond our organization. She contributed to a lot of other things that nobody knew about," said Henry Johnson, The Arc Detroit Executive Director.

"In the flood of tributes that followed her death, this remarkable woman has been mis-characterized as a person who spoke on behalf of people who needed a voice. What she did was bring those people forward so they could speak for themselves. For Detroit's disability community, that was unprecedented," Johnson concluded.

"I think her greatest legacy when it comes to people with disabilities is the fact that she saw them as equals," Sara said. "Her greatest lesson was that to stay true to our values and to each other defines what is good and what it is to be human."

Program

Songs of Celebration
Lamar Willis, Plymouth Congregational Church
The Battle Hymn of the Republic, I Believe I Can Fly

Entertainment
Jerry L. White Performing Arts Group
Marvis Sanders

Welcome
Barbara Lea Jones
Program Director, The Arc Detroit

Invited Speakers
Kenneth Cockrel
President, Detroit City Council

Sheila Cockrel
Detroit City Council Member

JoAnn Watson
Detroit City Council Member

Tommy Meadows
Chair, The Detroit Disability Advisory Task force

Sara Gleicher
Policy and Advocacy Coordinator
Adult Well Being Services

Brenda Jones, Services To Enhance Potential
Julia Murry, Services To Enhance Potential

Open Mic - Reflections from the Disability Community

Thank you from Maryann's Daughter
Susan Dooha, Executive Director
Center for Independence of the Disabled New York

Closing Song
We Shall Overcome

Thank you for your financial contribution

The Arc Dearborn-Dearborn Heights
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Maryann Bozenski
Wayne County Commissioner Philip Cavanagh
Jim Dehem
Mary Dempsey
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Jacqueline Perkins
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Elizabeth Janks
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Barbara Lea Jones
Manic-Depressive Association
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Memorial Committee
Vendela Collins, Developmental Disabilities Council
Jody Conradi Stark, Creative Arts Therapies, Inc.
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Henry "Hank" Johnson, The Arc Detroit
Barbara Lea Jones, The Arc Detroit
Tommy Meadows, Detroit Disability Task Force
Tammy Percy, Goodwill Industries
Robert Robleski, Consumer
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A Lasting Memorial

Working with the Greening of Detroit and the Detroit River Front Conservatory, this committee has arranged to plant a tree - with an appropriate perpetual marker-- in memory of Maryann Mahaffey at the Detroit RiverWalk adjacent to the Detroit River.