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Marie Wilkinson: 1909-2010

Remembering Aurora's Marie Wilkinson

Spirited advocate leaves behind an incomparable legacy

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In May 2009, in celebration of her 100th birthday, Beacon-News reporter Andre Salles wrote about Marie Wilkinson's many contributions to Aurora. Wilkinson died Thursday evening at age 101.

AURORA — It's hard to imagine Aurorans ever forgetting Marie Wilkinson, considering what an institution she is here. That's why it surprises some people to find out she wasn't a native. She was born Marie LeBeau in New Orleans on May 6, 1909, and first came to Aurora at age 13, to visit a friend of her mother. She moved to the city in 1929, at age 20.

While here, as the legend goes, she met Charles Wilkinson on a blind date. Charles was a mechanic — he would go on to own several shops, including P.W. Truck Parts in Aurora, and would teach mechanics at International Telephone and Telegraph Company in Chicago. He was not Catholic, as Marie was, but he would soon convert for her.

Three years later, the two of them were married. They had an arrangement, one they didn't write down, but held to throughout their marriage — they gave each other space and support. As Marie once said, they would go about their days, and would come back together at night and tell each other about them.

For Marie Wilkinson, that meant helping as many people as she could. Charles and Marie Wilkinson had two children, Donald and Sheila. Sheila, the younger, remembers being pulled to different places, and made to carry bags of food for hungry people. And she said her mother didn't just drop food off with people, she visited with them, becoming part of their lives.

Advocate and activist

It didn't take long for Marie Wilkinson to gain a reputation as someone you could turn to, whatever you needed. Wilkinson only had one house in Aurora, at 648 N. View St., and people would come by, day or night. For years the Wilkinsons' basement became a drop-off and pick-up point for food, clothes and other donations. If Marie wasn't home, people would leave items on her front porch.

By 1961, the donations had outgrown the basement. So with the help of the Rev. Joseph Rzeszotko of St. Peter's Church, she founded the St. Vincent DePaul Center on Sard Avenue. It was open Fridays and Saturdays, run by volunteers, and stocked full of essentials. And always there was Marie, looking for more ways to help.

She was just getting warmed up.

In the late 1950s, when Aurora and the nation were in the throes of segregation, Marie Wilkinson was told she would not be served at one of the city's restaurants. Incensed, she filed a civil complaint against the restaurant.

This, she has said, sparked her civil rights activism. In 1963, she convinced then-Mayor Jay Hunter to start what was initially called the Bi-Racial Commission. This grew into the Human Relations Commission, an independent board that heard cases of social injustice.

It was Wilkinson's dream that victims of discrimination, of any kind, could have a place to turn. She believed in this dream so much, she chaired the commission for 40 years.

Around the same time, Wilkinson, already well known in civil rights circles, became downright famous for organizing a fund drive for Dr. Martin Luther King's 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala. She helped raise \$12,000 to pay for food, housing and bail expenses for the march, and according to Aurora Alderman Sheketa Hart-Burns, she received a thank you call from Dr. King himself.

Love and legacy

Wilkinson's focus remained in Illinois, however. In 1968, she led the Human Relations Commission in opposing a state law that allowed discrimination in home sales. She complained to Attorney General William G. Clark, and he declared that law unconstitutional. Out of that legal battle grew Illinois' first-ever fair housing ordinance.

But most of her efforts were geared towards making Aurora a better place. In 1970, seeing a definite need for day care services — at the time, there was only one day care center in the city — Wilkinson founded the child development center that bears her name. It's still there, at 1444 E. Galena Boulevard, helping low-income families every day.

There's more, of course. It's not for nothing Wilkinson has a street, a park, and a charitable foundation named after her.

For Theodia Gillespie, executive director of the Quad County Urban League, another organization Wilkinson helped start in Aurora, Marie's legacy is in the lessons she taught through her life.

"She's someone who has taught us to have great integrity, love for mankind, and love for the community in which we live," she said.