

# The passionate Helen Steinkopf

TO borrow a style introduced by *Time* magazine many years ago: As it must to all people, death came to Helen Steinkopf last month, at the age of 86.

She was a passionate and dedicated advocate on behalf of the intellectually challenged over the last 55 years. Feisty and fiercely independent, she died exactly the way she would have wanted to: In the middle of a telephone conversation, advocating for one of her most passionate causes, the Continuity Care Endowment Fund capital campaign.

Herself the mother of a daughter with Down syndrome, she worked tirelessly to improve the quality of life of similarly challenged people when they become adults. Mrs. Steinkopf pioneered having these previously institutionalized folks live in group homes and function productively in the community within the limits of their abilities.

Her place in the intellectually disabled community is legendary. An impatient and almost intolerant foe of bureaucracy, she was pragmatic enough to do whatever had to be done to work within programs and systems as necessary and fundamental. But when she perceived that there was a better way than prevailing practices, ever the iconoclast, she wouldn't hesitate to innovate. Her strength of character and commitment easily persuaded others to join her.

She was an effective advocate, locally and provincially, as well as nationally. She had a wide circle of friends across the country.

One of her great concerns was the plight of young parents with an intellectually challenged child, who, with so many other pressures to address, also have the overriding burden of providing shelter and upkeep for their child when he or she becomes an adult and would eventually have to be on their own. She proposed that if the parents could get assistance through income tax deductions for moneys put into a special account to be invested and accumulate against the day they would be used to acquire housing for their child, this would go a long way to addressing this major concern. Her proposal was presented to the federal Minister of Finance, and she appeared before the House of Commons Finance Committee.

At the time of her passing, she was busy with two major causes amongst her many other routine commitments and activities. One was the Continuity Care Endowment Fund capital campaign to provide assured annual income for this significant service organization, which provides assistance to parents and siblings of intellectually challenged individuals in finding housing, supervision, access to programs and support. She saw this as a critically important service, desperately needed by its clients, and she recruited many others to share her vision.

But of even greater concern to her was the announced plan by the provincial government to spend \$40 million to rebuild and upgrade the one-hundred-year-old institution for the intellectually challenged in Portage la Prairie, which has 403 residents. To her, this is a monumentally retrograde step, flying in the face of received wisdom that it is far better for the residents to be out in the community rather than confined to institutional living. Along with other leading members of the intellectually challenged community, led by the Association

for Community Living of Manitoba, she was dedicating her not inconsiderable efforts to reverse this anachronism.

Helen Steinkopf was a very persuasive lady. It was almost impossible to say "no" to her because she gave twice as much of herself as she asked of others. She was an understated, private, almost shy leader and philanthropist, who supported a multitude of causes with a minimum of publicity or fanfare. When, following a lifetime of service - after declining several times - a couple of years ago she finally allowed herself to be honoured, it was only after she was persuaded it would help the cause. Her rare public remarks on that occasion reflected her infinite grace and quiet dignity.

Originally from Chicago, she married Maitland Steinkopf and was the perfect chatelaine to his busy life as business executive, provincial cabinet minister and community leader, until his untimely passing in 1970. She also took great pride in the activities and accomplishments of each of her six children.

She was generous, caring and concerned for her community, for the State of Israel and for the human condition. She loved travel and had returned from a trip to Europe with three of her children and a grandchild just three days before her death. She also loved nature, frequently hiking and exploring until a few years ago.

A free spirit, she marched to the beat of her own drummer.

Her legacy is the enhanced quality of the lives of so many intellectually challenged people across the country that would not have happened but for her efforts. Helen Steinkopf left an indelible impression on all who knew her, and we are the poorer for her passing.



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