

Eleanor Hansen

March 14, 1921 – July 20, 2013

Eleanor “Ele” Hansen, age 92 of Northfield, passed away Saturday, July 20, 2013 in Northfield. In 1952 she was hired as chair of the Department of Physical Education for women at Carleton College where she had a distinguished career until her retirement in 1986 as Professor Emeritus.

Eleanor Helen Hansen was born March 14, 1921 in St. Paul, MN, daughter of James and Elsie (Wendt) Hansen. Upon graduating from St. Paul Harding High School in 1939, Ele had few goals beyond working at Montgomery Ward as a catalog sales clerk and playing softball in the Twin City league for girls and women where she was known as the “little blonde twirler”, meaning that she was a pitcher and a very good one. On a dare, she and a group of friends went down to the Federal Building to check out a newly created opportunity for women to serve in the US Navy. Without thinking about it too much, she and a few others found themselves raising their right hands and joining the Waves. Stationed at Hunter College in New York City, Ele emerged as a natural leader and stayed there throughout the war helping to train new Wave recruits.

As the war ended, her superior officers almost insisted that Ele go on to college, taking advantage of the newly created GI Bill. At the time Ele did not see herself as a college educated person. She was taking the “road less traveled” as she timidly crept up to the registration table and enrolled as a Physical Education major at the University of Minnesota. She hoped to combine her love of sports and her newly discovered talents as a leader and motivator.

After one year of teaching in Cloquet Minnesota, Ele returned to the U of M to teach in the PE department and work on her Masters Degree. In 1952, President Larry Gould hired her to be Chair of Women’s Physical Education at Carleton College. Undaunted by the fact that her Department was housed in Gridley basement where modern dance and other activity classes were taught amongst pillars that acted as supports for the Women’s Dormitory above, Ele began the development of a varied program that would eventually enhance the lives of Carleton female students for years to come. Her goal was to grow the program by adding and nurturing activities that involved utilizing the wonderful outdoor spaces, readily available on and around the campus. She tried not to get discouraged by the fact that Sayles Hill Gymnasium for Men with its playing court and pool was simply not available to women students. Building additional indoor spaces that could be used for coed and/or women’s activities was

not even on the drawing boards and certainly not high priority items in the 1950s. Ele was not one to take on “battles” that she could not win.

Her philosophy, at least at the time, was to go ahead and accomplish as much as possible while working within the parameters set by the existing traditions and cultural values held by society. Always knowing in her heart that female Carleton students deserved fair and equal opportunities in every aspect of their lives, including sport, she didn’t really ask permission if the answer

might be “no” or “not yet”. If at all possible, she just went ahead and “made it happen”. She also knew that further change was on the horizon.

Ele had a lifelong passion for teaching and her greatest accomplishment was that countless generations of Carleton students who came to campus for serious academic study, discovered that adding physical activity to their lives made it more fun and that significant friendships were most often built through “play” and cooperative interaction with others.

Cowling Recreation Center was built in 1965. It became the center of an emerging feminist movement on campus as well as providing much needed indoor space for ever-expanding program of coed and women’s PE classes and intramurals. Ele reigned as “boss lady” of this building which was the cornerstone of her dream that the future needed to include equality of opportunities for both female and male Carleton students.

Ele guided the WPE Dept from the “play-day era” to a full-fledged athletic program for women. Her guiding principle throughout this transition was to do what was best for female athletes, believing that change should come gradually and with moderation. Upon her retirement in 1986, her friends and former students established the Ele Hansen Award given each year to the two female students “who bring to their sport the joy of participation and who have positively influenced others through their example, service and leadership in the athletic or recreation program.”

Ele lived her life in such a way that it was clearly God’s love made visible. Everyone who knew her “thought that she was going to live forever” and many of us believe that her spirit and presence will indeed continue on forever.

Ele Hansen is survived by her life partner Pat Lamb; nieces Jeanne (David) Ellis, Kathy (Leo) Watson; and nephew Jim (Judy) Ross.

-Obituary courtesy of Bierman Funeral Home

