In Loving Memory of

Ele Hansen

March 14, 1921 - July 20, 2013
Eleanor Hansen
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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
I knew Ele Hansen very well, first as an athletic female Carleton student in the late 60s, then a few years later as a member of the Women’s PE Department, and finally as a long-time friend. I want to share with you my letter to Ele.

Dear Ele,

I am so blessed to have known you, not only because you were such an important pioneer at Carleton, but because you were an exceptionally remarkable person who had a huge impact on my professional and personal life. I am a much better person for knowing you.

Long, long ago you recognized some kind of potential in this very shy young student and you gave me the courage to step out way beyond my comfort zone. You gave me opportunities not only to learn, but to teach. You gave me opportunities not only to grow and compete as an athlete, but to lead.

You showed unwavering faith in me when I wasn’t sure I could overcome the obstacles that faced me.

You encouraged me to grow into a mature and confident adult. At the same time, you were a great example of how important it is to never lose the joy and spontaneity of a child – the joy of remaining young forever. You had the courage once to confront me with observations that were painful to me, worrying that you might lose my friendship, but knowing I needed to hear what you had to say. I have been ever thankful you had that courage.

You trusted me enough to hire me as a teacher and colleague – something that to this day amazes me, because you knew my weaknesses all too well.

You challenged me to teach things that I didn’t know anything about. My first year on staff, you assigned me to teach cross country skiing because I was the only one in the department who admitted that I owned skis, even though I had not yet actually used them. You challenged me to do difficult things like this because it was “good for my character.”

You didn’t let me feel sorry for myself when I thought that I had failed miserably. Instead you “slapped me on the rump” (metaphorically speaking) and helped me to look forward and learn from the experience.

I teased you unmercifully about your frugality. (I’m sure there is no one else in Northfield who would put their car in neutral to coast down Washington St from Woodley to 4th just to save gas.) But you were one of the most generous people I’ve ever known. Moreover you were generous in big and important ways, giving so much of your life, your love, and your huge heart to those around you.

You were my role model of integrity. When I took on a position with huge responsibilities for people and finances at a college, I often thought of how you would advise me to handle the problems facing me at the moment. Your advice was almost always right.

You never asked for anything in return for all that you gave me. You didn’t want gifts or praise or even thanks. Instead you assured me that someday I would give as much to others and that was all you wanted.

Thank you for being my teacher and coach. Thank you for the dynamic team you and Pat were, and will continue to be. Thank you for being a strong and independent woman; and thank you for not being afraid to show your weaknesses. Thank you for being a wise and persistent mentor. Thank you for being a wonderful role model. Thank you for praying for me when I needed it the most. Thank you for loving me and being my friend.

And thank you for being forever young.

Marie Matsen ’69
Ele Hansen and Pat Lamb made a big difference in my life, probably without even knowing it. When I heard about Ele's death, I dug out some of my old Algols to take a look at some of the pictures of the Women's PE department during my years at Carleton (I was at Carleton from 1964 to 1968). As I paged through the yearbooks, I was struck by the lack of women on the faculty. I'm pretty much a numbers person so I went back and counted up the number of women on the faculty back then. By my count there were 11 and, as I looked at the departments with women, I knew that had I not taken PE I would not have had any women instructors while I was at Carleton. So at a time when very little was expected of women, Ele and Pat were role models for what women could be.

For me they were also a different kind of role model. While I was at Carleton, I realized I was gay, but I didn't know anyone else who was. What I “knew” about being gay that it meant you were a sick pervert; in my suburban Milwaukee hometown back then, the only thing worse than being a ‘commie’ was being a ‘commie queer’. I was a nice kid and the idea of being like that was terrifying. Some years later I realized that Pat and Ele were a couple. That understanding provided me with an awareness that being gay was not the end of the world – that one could be smart, productive and – yes, even ‘nice’ – and be gay. I’ve spent much of the 45 years since I graduated as a feminist and LGBT activist, in no small measure because I was inspired to be all that I could by Ele Hansen.

When I was at Carleton, people often quoted former President Laurence McKinley Gould as telling graduates that ‘you are a part of Carleton, and Carleton is a part of you’ – Pat and Ele will always be a part of Carleton that I esteem.

Christine Riddiough ’68

Dear Ele,

I was not really an inter-collegiate athlete at Carleton, but I sure enjoyed the Cowling Recreation Center. And I LOVED the emphasis on lifelong recreational activities. I have been an avid jogger, hiker, cyclist, skier, and tennis player since my Carleton days. (Being able to take skiing as a PE class factored significantly into my decision to attend Carleton.)

So, thanks to you and Pat for all that!

Barbara North Beck ’71

Dear Ele,

Remember our good old Women’s Recreation Association (WRA) when we had a stable (my favorite!) and tennis courts but little else? You were always so upbeat and positive about the importance and the joy of physical activity for women that even a non-athlete like me tried new things.

Your career spanned the blossoming of physical education for women with new facilities we hardly dreamed of. But it was your warmth and your genuine interest in each of us that really made the difference.

Is it any wonder that you and Pat were the teachers I wanted to meet for breakfast at our 40th Reunion? My husband and I loved our get-together and will miss you when we celebrate my 50th next spring.

Thanks for the memories!

Mary Hobbs Meland ’64
My first real tennis experience came in Ms. Hansen's Tennis PE class. I was very excited to actually learn the game, after swatting the ball around casually with friends back home. In my home town you had to be a rich kid to take tennis lessons, so there was a mystique about the game and a sense of unworthiness if you picked up a racquet and didn't know any of the game's etiquette. I was determined to figure it all out while I was away at school and take my new knowledge (and hoped for skills) triumphantly back home.

Ms. Hansen was encouraging and never made novices feel like there was any deficiency on our part. How she must have cringed at the balls that rocketed over the fence and onto Bell Field. She was patient in explaining that you couldn't run onto someone else's court to retrieve an errant ball. Or walk behind another player's game, except between points, and only after they gave you the go ahead. She called it a “life game” and told us we could keep playing forever.

I loved everything about that class. The courts on Bell Field, the little room under the women's gym with the ball machine, the shared laughter as we tried to remember to “stay behind the ball”, bend our knees and not give it “too much pepper.” I maxed out on tennis classes in PE, but kept taking them anyway. I used to hope Ms. Hansen was as excited to see me back as I was to be there. If she wasn't, I never knew. She welcomed us all with enthusiasm.

I'm still playing tennis today. I remind the newbies on my usta team not to “intrude” onto other courts and that tennis is a life game. It certainly has been for me. Thanks to Ms. Hansen (and later Ms. Lamb) for the tolerance and patience it took to start me playing.

Fondly,

Cindi Abrams Kingsley '81

Ele Hansen was one of those great people who accomplished wonders with humility, caring, strength of character, and doggone hard work. Together with Pat Lamb and many others in the Women's Phy Ed Dept, she created an atmosphere in which women could participate and succeed in sports, back in the 50's and 60's before Title IX, when we were told that women did not sweat or perspire - we glowed! When we came to Carleton, in 1967, the Women's Rec Center was the most modern center for women that we had even seen - and all the guys came there, too, to swim and take courses. Both Ele and Pat have been, and will remain, role models for many Carls in the years to come.

Madelene Jorgensen '72

Ele, thanks for being such a solid presence in my life at Carleton. A couple of memories really stand out. I remember you were taking care of an intense, painful blister that I had - we must have spent a half an hour on that thing. It felt so much better after that. I also remember running into your office in tears one day after the bank told me I had overdrawn my checking account. I never had a checking account before, so it was upsetting to me. You said well, how much are you over drawn? I said, fifteen dollars! You handed me fifteen dollars and told me to go to the bank and pay it off. I could count on your encouragement, support and calm reassurance when I needed it - both on the team, and off, in academics and adjusting to life away from home.

Rebecca Riley '82
As I was unloading the car and moving into Nourse almost 40 years ago, three women walked by and commented; “Oh we have another athlete” as they saw my field hockey and lacrosse sticks...I hadn't intended on playing sports in college because I was going to “get serious” about my academics but my mom had insisted that I take my sticks with me. Thank God Ele, Pat, and Mylla passed me that day and invited me in to play...I've never really stopped. They literally saved my life and so many other lives with their encouragement and enthusiasm for all things sports.

Pat and Ele also offered their love and support as I searched and questioned my own identity at a time when being open and honest was very difficult. They led by grace and beauty and I always admired them for that. I remember a very funny story, visiting their house for a meeting of some sort we were all given a tour before we sat down to business. Being rather naive, I just assumed that there was another bedroom on the other side of the house we hadn't seen. This is hard to believe in 2013 but in 1974 these were brave women to open their home and lives for anyone to see. When I did open my eyes they were gracious and supportive mentors. Life Partner wasn't a term we could use back then but thank god we can celebrate 52 years of a wonderful relationship!!

Congratulations to Ele for a life well lived, she will be missed....and sympathies to Pat for the loss of a fabulous life partner.

Sanna Randall ’78

Dear Ele,

You were a wonderful inspiration to me during my years as a lifeguard at the pool. Thankfully I never got in too much trouble when I would play the music from Jaws when swimmers were in the pool. I remember being invited to your home and always held you in the highest regard. My thoughts are with your family and friends during this difficult time.

Kay Biga ’82

“Ele, I know, will forever be a part of the Carleton team.

– Megan Morrison ’13”
Some people are never forgotten. Ele is one of those special people. The news of her death came the old fashioned way (in the mail). Assuming this was a Carleton fund raising letter, I was surprised to see Ele’s picture when I read the note. Her photo made me smile. The news of her passing made me sad.

Since that time, I have been reflecting on all that Carleton, and more pointedly Ele, taught me. Ironically my current memories mix with my college year memories and I am still shocked to see that we have all aged, for I remember all of us as we were in 1977.

So, here is what I would like to thank Ele for teaching me (as an educator, coach, and friend):

* People matter
* Have an opinion and don’t be afraid to speak up
* Team work matters
* Graciousness and humility always work
* Be organized and thoughtful in your world no matter where you are
* Life is not a dress rehearsal, so show up and participate and embrace it

It remains hard to fully verbalize the impact Ele and Carleton have played on my life. So, in the spirit of sending in a fond remembrance for an unforgettable person, I will simply say goodbye. Please know you are, and will be missed, but will never be forgotten.

Amy Welch ’77

For the Love of Tennis

Ever since I was 8 I wanted to play tennis. My parents told me I’d have to wait until my tenth birthday. I watched my older siblings serve and rally, and dreamed of playing in the local Labor Day tournament. This is a mixed doubles event, where your partner’s name is selected randomly out of a hat. With fatigued and dusty white balls, I used the garage door as a backboard, and played with friends early in the morning before school began. Competition in my school remained “within walls.”

At Carleton College, I waited for the Phys Ed schedule to be posted and signed up for tennis whenever possible. When selected to represent the college as a member of the women’s doubles team, I was excited to travel around to different campus venues. Under Ele’s coaching, we did better than we ever expected. She taught us the strategies we needed to employ, and reminded us before each match. Most encouraging were her words, never commanding, but accompanied with a demonstration as to how to prepare for a high backhand volley or where to stand to receive a first serve. Bounce a little on your toes. Anticipate the ball, and follow through after you hit it. If your partner is in the alley over there, move to fill the gap. I am not sure of her exact words, but I imagine I can hear her voice.

Being a good sport and courteous toward your opponents did not have to be said, it was learned by observing a terrific example.

At our 45th reunion in 2003, I was able to tell Ele I had made it into the Labor Day tournament, and actually won it, with a tall partner who put the ball away to win points, but that all the coaching from college years had helped me focus on my strengths and persevere toward steadiness in my game. “It probably did,” she remarked.

Maisie Goodale Crowther ’58
I arrived at Carleton with two years of high school sports experience. That is because my high school had just begun to sponsor girl’s teams, and I started to play in my junior year.

At Carleton, I found a much more developed program, featuring several teams, an amazing choice of physical education classes and a Women’s Recreation Center run by personable professors who could teach me any sport I wanted to learn. To understand their importance to women students, the women’s physical education department had three of only nine tenured female professors on the faculty in 1976.

Ele chaired the department. The professors were adding one or two women’s intercollegiate sports teams each year at that time and maintaining all of their other physical education offerings. Their workload was immense, but they were so happy to be able to create and expand these opportunities for women that they took it on with joy. Ele was at the center of that joy, having built these opportunities gradually over 25 years of work at the college. And she got to watch all of that effort come together in the years after the passage of Title IX.

We knew we had so much more opportunity to participate than we would have had even five years before. And we knew who made that possible, because we got to be at Carleton with Ele.

Everything has continued to develop in the thirty three years since I graduated, and it makes me happy to see what the college now offers all students. It is wonderful that this can be taken for granted. We should remember and be grateful for Ele, because she started it all.

Ann Seha ’80

I believe during my ’53 to ’57 years at Carleton, some phys.ed classes were held in the basement of Gridley Hall where I also lived and which is no longer standing. To keep freshman weight down, we did sit-ups, touched our toes and bumped on the wooden floor to keep our bottoms as firm as possible. The time was well spent. Ele, you were always smiling and kind. I’m so pleased to have known you.

Victoria (Torie) Kneevers Sheagren ’57

Dear Ele,

Your support of active women set me on my career path. Hiring me to teach beginning figure skating and work in the Rec Center sparked my interest in general activity, rather than just sport. As a result I first earned a Master’s Degree in Physical Education and then went on to earn both a Master’s and Doctorate in Physical Therapy. I was in the first generation of women to have equal opportunity in athletics and it was because of women like you. Thank You!

Jane Fuller Killough ’76
I was not part of any groups mentioned in the news note, but yes, of course I remember Ele Hansen fondly. I grew up in Mankato, Minnesota, long before Title IV, and like some other girls was fairly athletic, loved track and baseball. But then in high school, such things were frowned upon for girls; teams for girl athletics didn’t exist (except synchronized swimming, a “sport” I still think is nonsense). Yet, friends and I skated in winter, played tennis in summer, not knowing those were indeed actual sports. At Carleton, PE was required, so girls drudged through what was offered, but I and a couple friends would play tennis for fun on the side. One day Ele watched us—that was fine, as we all liked her a lot. Later, she asked me to join the tennis team, said I had the skills, very complimentary. I was stunned, didn’t know there was such a team, OR that being on one was even socially acceptable. So I did not do it, which I still regret. I was an artsy type, but would quietly go to all football games, many basketball ones, guy sports of course, and met many neat other CC students I’d not have known otherwise. Ele was always supportive of girl students, so positively encouraged girls whatever they pursued. Even though I didn’t do tennis for real, she was always interested in my progress other ways; we’d visit regularly. I tried skiing once; a different PE teacher thought it was good to do Boliou hill at -20 degrees, plus some trip up north somewhere, also super-cold. I was so crabby at -20 that even good friends would not speak to me as I walked from dorm to Tea Room for hot coffee, knowing I’d growl.

Ele knew that. Next year, bowling downtown was offered, she suggested I try that instead, OK with me as in high school we’d do that too for fun, not aware it qualified as a sport either. She thought it pretty humorous when I jumped at the opportunity to do a “sport” indoors. In fact, many years later, I even bowled on a ladies’ league here in Monte Vista, CO, loved it until arthritis stopped my weekly attempts. So I am grateful for having known her, and glad she enjoyed such a long, productive life. She truly cared about her students as valuable people, and gave me support and incentive. I appreciate her teaching to this day. RIP, good lady, and thanks.

Margy Klenk Robertson ’64

My mother told me once that smart girls don’t go into physical education. You made a liar out of her.

You taught me to choose a job I love, to invite people over and feed them generously, and never to put off taking a cool vacation.

Chris Barber ’65

Ele lived a full life—and thousands of women are now living a healthy, strong life because of Ele’s wisdom and spunk. May her spirit live in joy and peace, always present in Carleton.

Patricia Blomquist

I just graduated from Carleton and played soccer all 4 years. I owe all of that to Ele and Pat, whose legacy lives on and inspires us today when we learn about all they have done for Carleton and women’s sports here. I also had the chance to have lunch with Pat and Ele which meant so much to me. I was so warmed by their open hearts and dedication to the Carleton community and athletics. Ele, I know, will forever be a part of the Carleton team.

Megan Morrison ’13

Ele, I thank you for the fact that—despite being totally uncoordinated all my life—I have been physically active all my adult life. Indeed, I retain a sense of enjoyment in movement, and a willingness to try moving in new ways, decades after you charmingly and persistently introduced me to those concepts. I will never excel, but I will always enjoy. Thank you!

Dorothy Broom ’66

Letters to Ele
Ele was a very important and significant role model for me and other women students at Carleton. Back in the Fall of 1967 when I first started Carleton, we were required to take a physical education course every term. That brought us to the Women's Rec Center and there stood Ele welcoming us.

Ele nourished and guided us throughout our years at Carleton, getting us away from our books for a few moments; nudging us out of any moods we might be in; laughing with us; playing sports with us; and teaching us skills that would last us life long.

Always filled with irresistible enthusiasm and radiating such enormous joy of life, Ele inspired us to live life fully. She was a glowing example to us of integrity, strength, and great balance of mind, body and spirit.

Our four years at Carleton saw many dramatic, and sometimes turbulent, changes. The Women's Rec Center remained an oasis throughout these changes. And Ele always remained constant as a source of kind support, caring and genuine, warm hearted friendliness.

We deeply appreciated Ele's commitment to the well being of Carleton women through all she did for us and through her own beautiful radiant example.

What a precious legacy Ele leaves behind at Carleton and within all of our hearts.

God Bless Her always!

Irene Horak '71
Ele Hansen is one of a very small number of people who changed my life in significant ways. In addition, she was the most cheerful and optimistic person I have ever known. I am so fortunate to have known her for 48 years as a teacher, coach, mentor, colleague, and loving friend. I will miss her terribly.

Marie Matsen ’69

Ele’s teaching style and positive attitude toward us all made me happy to be there with her. I still feel that way about activity 45 years later. My tribute to Ele is the happiness I feel when I use it, walking, swimming playing tennis. She and Pat Lamb taught me tennis. What fun that class was. I remember Ele starting us off by noting that this was our time to escape from our head and to become aware of having a physical self. She set us up in doubles matches, played with us and enjoyed the moment right along with us. I enjoy a lot of times in my life because of Ele’s approach to intermediate tennis. Thank you, Ele.

Lucy Steiner ’69

There are so many things that you will be remembered for Ele, especially your commitment to advancing college sports for women, your constant encouragement and your practicality. One of the practical things I learned having Ele as a coach were all the “back roads” in St. Paul. After graduation when I moved to The Cities, my friends were amazed at my ability to find my way around St. Paul, I always told them it was thanks to Ele Hanson because she never took the Interstate.

Greta Anderson ’81

I have survived the typical hostility of the old establishment in getting through med school, OB/Gyn residency, and serving almost 35 years in OB/Gyn profession. When I was told not to do it because I wasn’t strong enough to pull our babies with forceps, I could laugh at them.

Ele was always positive in her approach to teaching even when “correction” was needed. What an inspiration she was! I have many fond memories, too numerous to count.

Nancy Kerr ’70

Letters to Ele