

## **Dr. Martha Peterson**

### **Pioneer Woman 2007**

Martha Peterson, a small town Kansas girl who grew up to become a pioneer for women in higher education and corporate America, graced us with 90 years of life, dedication, and service. Dr. Peterson was born in 1916 on a farm near Jamestown, Kansas. She graduated from Salina High School in 1933 and immediately headed east to attend the University of Kansas where she would officially become a Jayhawk for life.

“In June one day at Sunday dinner, Uncle Markle asked me where I wanted to go to college. I said ‘Either KState or KU.’ He asked what I planned to study and I responded, ‘Mathematics.’ He said ‘KU is the better school for that so we best get organized’” –

Peterson, Martha E. *From Kansas to Oz; My Life as I Remember it.*

In 1937 and 1943, Dr. Peterson earned her bachelor’s and master’s degree in mathematics. While completing the final year of her master’s program, she began teaching math in the KU Mathematics Department. She continued her teaching for 10 years, until 1952. Within four years of receiving her master’s degree, she became Assistant Dean of Women (1947-1952) and shortly thereafter was promoted to Dean of Women (1952-1956). Dr. Peterson earned her doctorate in 1959 in Educational Psychology and Counseling from KU. Dr. Peterson embarked upon a career in teaching, and then proceeded to undertake administrative opportunities in Kansas, in Wisconsin, in New York, and ultimately in Beloit. In 1975, she became the first woman to assume the presidency of Beloit College, where she would remain until her retirement from academic life in 1981.

Dr. Peterson, first and foremost, was known as an inspired leader, advocate, and role model for KU women. In addition, she established KU’s Wealthy Babcock Fund in 1980 and the Martha Peterson Fund in 1986. Both of these funds were used to strengthen undergraduate education. Second, Dr. Peterson pledged \$50,000 to the Campaign Kansas to be equally divided between the School of Education and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Campaign Kansas was a \$150 million fund drive. Third, she is largely responsible for the 1952 installation of the dormitory system for all freshman women. Due to an increase in women’s enrollment at KU, in the early 50’s, Dr. Peterson wanted to provide housing to accommodate these students through residence halls and scholarship halls. Dr. Peterson did so by creating Gertrude Sellards Pearson Residence Hall and four scholarship halls; these would house nearly 1,000 freshman women.

KU’s Women’s Hall of Fame (1972), the Distinguished Service Citation (1968), President Emerita (1981), KU School of Education’s Apple Award (1993), and honorary degrees from twenty institutions are just a few of the many ways that Dr. Peterson has been recognized for her outstanding leadership and commitment to students over the

years. Additionally, she has made a name for herself through the numerous positions that she has held. She was the first woman to serve on the board of directors of Dry Dock Savings Bank, Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, and Exxon. "I'm not sure Exxon knows what kind of woman they got in me," Dr. Peterson stated in April 1975 regarding being the first woman on the Board. After leaving the University of Kansas in 1956 she assumed the roles of Dean of Women at the University of Wisconsin (1956-1962), Dean of Students at Wisconsin (1962-1967), President of Barnard College, and President of Beloit College. Dr. Peterson was at home in three worlds: the classroom, the realm of academic administration, and the business world.

Dr. Peterson passed away on July 16, 2006. William Crowe, Spencer Librarian, Spencer Research Library was quoted in KU's New Release, July 19, 2006, immediately following Dr. Peterson's passing; "Martha was a very special woman – of high accomplishment but with a down-to-earth quality that always reflected her Kansas upbringing and education." Dr. Peterson, a former Kansas farm girl, has done exemplary work on behalf of the University of Kansas, our state, and the country. Her remarkable life is well documented in one of her last gifts to her alma mater: her personal and professional papers, which she donated to the Kansas Collection, the regional history division of the KU Libraries. Students, scholars and the general public are invited to explore that extensive collection at the Spencer Research Library.