

KU 'legend' Emily Taylor dies

Former dean mentored generations of women

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In a high school oratory contest, Emily Taylor gave the best speech but won second place.

The reason, she said in a 1999 Journal-World interview, was that the judges couldn't let a girl win. "'Of course she was better,' they said. But we couldn't let a nice young boy be defeated by a girl," Taylor recalled. "I was 16. I didn't forget it."

Taylor, who spent her life as a champion of women's causes, died Saturday in Lawrence. She was 89. Plans for a memorial service are pending.

As Kansas University's dean of women from 1956 to 1975, the Alabama native established what now is known as the Emily Taylor Women's Resource Center to assist students of both sexes. She also founded the nation's first university student commission on the status of women, which still exists.

Taylor left KU to become director of the Office of Women in Higher Education at the Washington, D.C.,-based American Council on Education. She retired from that post in 1982, and had made Lawrence her home since 1986.

In retirement, Taylor continued to travel the country as a lecturer and consultant on issues related to women and education. She also became active in health care and end-of-life care issues, including serving on the Kansas Board of Healing Arts.

During her tenure as director of the Office of Women in Higher Education, she helped establish a national program to identify women for high-level university administration jobs. Hundreds of women who participated in the program now are presidents or chancellors of U.S. colleges and universities or serving in high administrative posts.

"Women didn't need any special consideration" when they began seeking more employment opportunities, Taylor said in a 1979 interview. "All they wanted was to be treated like everyone else."

'A legend unto herself'

Throughout her career, Taylor was a leader of female educators, women's organizations and groups concerned with the status of women.

She served on the Kansas Governor's Commission on the Status of Women from 1969 to 1975 and was appointed to the Maryland Commission on the Status of Women in 1975. From 1975 to 1977, she was president of the National Association of Commissions for Women.

"Emily was a legend unto herself," KU Chancellor Robert Hemenway said Saturday. "Emily Taylor's conviction, drive and enthusiasm for the cause of equal rights among women and minorities left an incredible legacy at KU and the nation. At a time when the opportunities for women were very limited, Emily fought to give them the same opportunities, both academic and professionally, as the men."

Taylor was one of the first people Jeff Weinberg, now assistant to the chancellor, met when he came to KU. He worked in her office as a student in the 1960s. Like many people who knew her, Weinberg said he found it almost impossible to tell Taylor "no."

"She was one of the most extraordinary people I've ever met," he said. "It wasn't just force of personality; it was the depth of her vision, the personal strength, that really inspired people." Weinberg added that even those who disagreed with Taylor admired her and saw her as a friend.

"She lived by principles," he said, "but she always listened to people."

State Rep. Barbara Ballard, director of the Emily Taylor Women's Resource Center from 1980 to 1997, called Taylor "admirable, brilliant and an outstanding mentor."

"Emily was one of a kind, which made her a rare gem, and everyone who met her would say she made a difference in their lives," Ballard said.

'Simple but brilliant'

Taylor also was a mentor to Kala Stroup, who was a student at KU when the new dean arrived in 1956. After graduating, Stroup worked with Taylor in student administration at KU for 18 years and succeeded her as dean of women in 1975.

When Taylor implemented what Stroup called the "simple but brilliant idea" of identifying and nurturing women to prepare them for university leadership roles, Stroup was in "the first wave" of participants. She went on to serve as president of Murray State University in Kentucky and Southeast Missouri State before serving as Commissioner of Higher Education for Missouri.

Now living in Lawrence, Stroup recalled the influence Taylor had on students in the 1950s and '60s.

"She gave us confidence and the opportunity to display our leadership and pushed us to take advantage of our intellectual opportunities," she said.

Taylor "was and is the most significant woman leader on the national scene in the late '70s and '80s," Stroup said, and will be a noted figure in the history of higher education.

Stroup also noted that Taylor played an important role in the turbulent 1960s and '70s by "giving students an opportunity to speak out."

C.J. Brune, Lawrence, was one of those students. As a member of the February Sisters, she occupied a campus building in February 1972 demanding campus day care for children, a women's studies program, better pay and jobs for women and better health care -- including the availability of birth control.

Brune said her group had grown frustrated with Taylor because of her inaction on women's issues. Taylor later told her strides were being made on many of the issues behind closed doors.

"I'm certainly willing to give that woman credit for anything that happened quickly," Brune said. "I'm sure it wasn't all the February Sisters action."

In a 1986 interview, Taylor recalled that night in 1972 and the agreement she bartered with administrators to make sure there would be no retaliation against the group.

"Remember," she said, "I had been using my methods for a great many years trying to accomplish what they accomplished in a very short time by their methods. So I have no objection to whatever nonviolent methods that work."

Walking the walk

Marilyn Stokstad, emeritus professor of art history at KU, met Taylor within a week or two of arriving on the KU campus in 1958 and almost immediately was tapped by the dean to be involved with campus women's groups.

"She was always leading us astray," Stokstad said, laughing, "pushing us to do more than we thought we could."

"She had a true spirit of leadership, putting herself on the line, not just talking a good line but doing something."

That spirit never left her, Stokstad said. Two years ago, the Emily Taylor and Marilyn Stokstad Women's Leadership Lecture Series was founded.

In the past five years, Taylor turned her attention to the work of the Kansas LIFE Project, which is dedicated to providing pain management and dignity at the end of life.

Donna Bales, president and CEO of the project, said Taylor founded the Lawrence Caring Communities Council on end-of-life issues and was serving on the LIFE Project board.

"She was just a grassroots organizer exemplar," Bales said of Taylor, adding that she had a passion for making sure people's end-of-life wishes were respected. "She had lived her life her way," Bales said, "and she wanted to live the end of her life her way."

Among Taylor's many honors were induction to the KU Women's Hall of Fame, KU's Distinguished Service Citation, the Leadership Lawrence Don Volker Award, the Kiwanis Substantial Citizen Award, Kansan of Achievement for Civil Rights, induction to the Ohio Women's Hall of Fame, induction to the Urbana University Hall of Distinction and induction to the Ohio Independent colleges Foundation Hall of Excellence.

In 1992, the Lawrence Chamber of Commerce named Taylor its "Citizen of the Years." In fact, Taylor was responsible for changing the face of the chamber when she led a group of women in attending what previously had been an all-male chamber mixer in the mid-1970s. A woman had mistakenly been sent an invitation, but was not allowed to make a reservation because the party was only for men.

When Taylor called to make reservations for her group and also was told the mixer was for men only, she responded, "Not anymore." When her group marched into the meeting, the master of ceremonies had the band play "When the Saints Go Marching In."

"They knew they were licked," Taylor recalled with a laugh 20 years later. "The next day the board voted to allow women at the mixer, acting as if it was all their idea in the first place."

-- Staff writer Terry Rombeck contributed to this story.

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