

KU remembers Emily Taylor



Emily Taylor, dean of women from 1956 to 1975, sits with a group of KU students in this 1971 photograph. Taylor, who died on May 1 at the age of 89, was regarded by many as a mentor who devoted her life to advocating for women. *Kansas Alumni Association Archives*

Mentor and leader in women's rights movement dies at 89

Emily Taylor, a leader in the women's rights movement for three decades at KU, died May 1 in Lawrence. She was 89.

Many women who knew Taylor as KU's dean of women from 1956 to 1975 regarded her as a mentor who devoted her life to changing the perception of women in society, as well as helping them to explore opportunities in academics and professional careers.

"I knew her at a time when there was certainly a lot of energy regarding social issues," said Priscilla Reckling, a 1971 KU graduate who is program director in the Office of Grants and Research at the KU School of Nursing. "I think for many of us, she stimulated our thinking about what was possible in the world and what we could contribute to the world."

Kathryn Vratil, a student at KU in the 1970s, said Taylor knew the potential Vratil and other young women possessed.

“Without Emily Taylor, I would not have had the idea—let alone the courage—to attend law school at a time when less than 10 percent of the students were women,” said Vratil, now the U.S. District Court judge in Kansas City, Kan. “She challenged generations of KU students to rethink what we thought we knew about the responsibilities and opportunities for women in American society.”

KU Chancellor Robert Hemenway said Taylor’s contributions to KU would be long remembered.

“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,” Hemenway said. “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.

“Emily has influenced the lives of countless numbers of students in the course of her life. Her death is a profound loss for the KU family, and we express our deepest sympathies to her family and friends. She will be missed.”

Marlesa Roney, vice provost for student success at KU, remembers a story Taylor often told of attending a national conference with some students in the late ’60s while serving as KU’s dean of women. It was lunchtime, and the women and men were standing in line waiting to be served food.

“They started pulling the men out of the line and seating them in the dining room first,” Roney said. “Emily asked what was going on; they told her the men needed to eat first because they needed to go back to work. Emily insisted the women be served at the same time as the men.

“It’s those kinds of examples that helped me to understand the courage and energy that she had to create change and the impact she had on people.”