

Dean's passion lives in those she mentored

By [Ann Gardner](#)

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Emily Taylor didn't have any biological children and, yet, Mother's Day seems the perfect time to honor this woman who influenced so many people's lives.

Right up to a few days before her death last weekend, Emily dedicated herself to convincing people, especially young people, that they could do more than they thought they could. During almost 20 years as Kansas University's dean of women, she mentored a generation of young women who were just beginning to awaken to the influences of the feminist movement. Under Emily's leadership, they weren't allowed to be shy about asserting their intellectual or leadership abilities.

Back then, of course, it was "Dean Taylor." No one would have dreamed of calling her "Emily." That certainly was true of students, but also for most of the predominantly male administration at KU. I approached Dean Taylor with a mixture of awe and trepidation as I interacted with her in my role as president of Sellards Scholarship Hall and later KU's All Scholarship Hall Council.

Some of that interaction took place during weekly meetings of KU's Administrative Housing Board, made up of Taylor, Vice Chancellor Bill Balfour, Housing Director J. J. Wilson and Dean of Men Don Alderson, along with student presidents of the Association of University Residence Halls and the scholarship hall council. It was obvious, as we discussed various living group issues, how much respect Dean Taylor garnered. She was a tough adversary, not because she was trying to be difficult but because she was so passionate about her principles. Once she had established in her mind what was "the right thing" to do, she was relentless, not mean or disrespectful, but relentless in trying to move others toward that goal.

Focus on students

Most often those goals involved students. She was always willing to listen to students and give them more responsibility. She wasn't particularly interested in how things had always been done; she wanted to see how they could be done better. She was instrumental in opening countless doors to students, especially women. She eliminated closing hours at women's halls and established the first student commission on the status of women anywhere in the country. When several rape reports spurred fear on campus one year in the early '70s, her office initiated a "Whistle Stop" program in which silver whistles were distributed to women who could use them to sound the alarm if they were threatened with attack. She wanted women to take responsibility for themselves, not defer to others.

When I mentioned to Emily during my junior year that I was looking for a summer job, she hired me to work in her office, a job I kept through my senior year. That was 1974-75, the year she left KU to begin her work with the Office of Women in Higher Education. I didn't keep in close

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contact with her while she was in Washington, D.C., but it wasn't long after she retired to Lawrence in 1986 that our paths crossed again.

Sometime after that, I made the transition to calling her Emily. I don't know how it happened, but I got to know her in a different way than I had as a student. She told me I had to get involved in the local branch of American Association of University Women, which she had nurtured back to life. And, as many people remember, you just couldn't say "no" to Emily. Well, you could, but it was like she just didn't hear it, so eventually you ended up going along with whatever plan she was proposing.

She went on to involve me in a number of her pet projects, including her most recent passion for end-of-life care issues. As much as we loved her, I know I'm not the only friend of Emily who occasionally cringed when we heard her voice on the phone. We knew she probably had something for us to do, and we wouldn't be able to get out of it. We felt like we didn't have time, but there was no escape.

'Sisters in crime'

Marilyn Stokstad, professor emeritus of art history at KU, was a long-time friend and colleague of Emily's. When we talked the day of Emily's death, she laughed about how quickly after her arrival on campus in 1958 she had been "absorbed" by Emily's plans for her. She thought she had her hands full getting started with a full teaching load, but Emily needed more female faculty role models and tapped Stokstad to be the faculty adviser for an honorary group of female students.

Stokstad, who founded a women's leadership lecture series with Taylor several years ago also referred to the "sisters in crime": Emily, herself and any other women who were drawn into Emily's various missions.

Many women who attended KU in the 1950s, '60s and '70s recalled Emily as a mentor. I didn't really think of her that way, but I know now that she was. She chose you, not the other way around. The way she mentored me -- and probably many others -- was to push me into situations in which I might not have asserted myself and then make sure I didn't back away. Often the push came with a little advice. I still never put a name tag on my right shoulder without remembering the times she ripped one off my left side and repositioned it. It goes on the right, she scolded, because when you shake hands, it's right there for the person to read.

Emily loved to have people around, and the hospitality and conversation in the home she shared with her sister, Genevieve, was always delightful. Once, when Emily invited me for dinner, I -- knowing full well that Gen was the cook and Emily rarely was in the kitchen -- jokingly asked Emily what she was going to make for dinner.

"I make the arrangements," she said. How true. She helped many people arrange their lives for the better, not to meet her own goals but to allow each individual to meet hers or his. Her legacy still is pushing all those she mentored to help the next generation to do the same.