



TRIBUTE TO WOMEN

Six receive a Tribute!, but many reap the rewards of their efforts

The Grand Rapids Press

They have strength and determination. They have worked hard, stuck to their goals, given of themselves. Now they'll inspire, as they accept a prestigious Tribute.

The YWCA Tribute! awards are presented annually to recognize the exceptional contributions of local women. This year's awards luncheon is the 10th since the program began in 1977. For the first decade, the awards were presented every other year, but became an annual event beginning in

1989. Tickets this year are sold out.

Five other women will be honored with student winner Valerie Trasky Wednesday at a luncheon at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel. They are:

- Sister Agnes Thiel – Advocacy;
- Julie Christianson Stivers – Arts and Communication;
- Jane Ross – Business, Management and Industry;
- Elizabeth (Betsy) Dole – Community Service;
- Margaret Sellers – Professions

Read about these dynamic women here and on pages K2 and K3.



Julie Christianson Stivers: Arts and Communication



Margaret Sellers: Professions



Sister Agnes Thiel: Advocacy



Jane Ross: Business, Management and Industry



Elizabeth (Betsy) Dole: Community Service

FLAIR

THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

A LEGACY FOR LIFE

In many ways Valerie was a typical teen, but her spirit, insight continue to inspire others, even after her death

STUDENT

Stories by Terri Finch Hamilton
The Grand Rapids Press

She had a stylish hat for every occasion, and would light up a room with her smile. Children gravitated toward her like mice to the Pied Piper, and in her gentle way she eased their pain.

Valerie Trasky was 15 when she died in August after a valiant battle with cancer. She was eagerly planning for her freshman year at Forest Hills Northern High School, after a busy summer volunteering with children in a pediatric cancer ward.

She was a normal teen-ager in her love of sports, malls and long phone conversations about clothes and boys. She was extraordinary in her inner peace, spirit and convictions.

Valerie will be honored for her courage and contributions Wednesday at the YWCA Tribute Awards. Her mother, Cathie, will accept the posthumous award. Some may shake their heads and murmur about the tragedy, but those who knew Val would rather celebrate her life.

"Once in a while a person of greatness crosses your path, and you know you're a better person just for knowing them. Val was that kind of person," said Sheila Morris, child life specialist at DeVos Children's Hospital at Butterworth Hospital.

Morris is in charge of the playroom, where young cancer patients try to forget about doctors and chemotherapy and just act like kids. Val called her early in June, happy and in remission. The last place a cancer patient in remission usually wants to be is the hospital. Val was different



“She told me she wanted to volunteer, to touch the lives of the other children in the hospital,” Morris said. So every Monday throughout the last summer of her life, Valerie came to play and talk with the children.

“The kids just gravitated toward Val,” Morris said. “They sensed that she truly understood. It was like she wanted to protect the essence of their childhood.”

Children diagnosed with cancer often “shut down,” Morris said, unable to communicate or play.

“Val would gently draw them out into play,” Morris said. “I’d see her sitting on the floor, with a little girl nearby, quiet and withdrawn. Val would take the dolls in the dollhouse and move them around, making them talk. She was playing for a child who found it too painful to play herself.”

A few days before her death from non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, Valerie was of particular help to Morris, who was busy planning a hospital picnic. The activity of the day was rock painting. The kids loved it, but it created a huge mess.

The two finally had the mess cleaned up when a little boy walked in, and asked Valerie if he could paint a rock.

“Val asked me, and I asked her to direct him to another activity — we had finally gotten the place cleaned up,” Morris recalled.

Val just smiled, and Morris headed off to a meeting. When she returned, there was Val with the little boy, painting a rock.

“He was having the time of his life,” Morris said softly. “And in that instant I

VALERIE *As a volunteer, teen brought caring to other young patients*

CONTINUED FROM K1

knew that even at her young age, Val knew what was really important in life — it was letting that little boy paint a rock.”

When the YWCA added a student category to its Tribute Awards last year, organizers said it was to inspire young women to reach their full potential. Those who knew Valerie said she inspired them — profoundly.

“She had wisdom and insight way beyond her chronological years,” said Dr. James Fahner, Valerie’s doctor and division chief of pediatric hematology/oncology at the DeVos Children’s Center at Butterworth Hospital.

He treated Val for the year and a half between her diagnosis and death, during months of intense chemotherapy, lengthy hospitalization, surgery, unpredictable infections. His young patient never lost an appreciation for life, Fahner said. It was his idea to nominate her for Tribute.

Cancer didn’t kill compassion

“Most people become so caught up in their own struggle with disease they aren’t able to reach out to anybody,” Fahner said. “Val could be having a very difficult time, but she reached out, found ways to support the other kids who were going through what she was. She never lapsed into self-pity.”

He remembers the day a TV station came to interview Val about being a teen with cancer.

“We were all very protective of her,” Fahner recalled. “We were nervous — she was vulnerable. We stood right there behind the camera for support. The camera started rolling and suddenly there was this incredibly mature, composed, insightful young woman talking about what it was like to have cancer. It took our breath away. We had to walk away from the camera, we were so emotionally overcome.”

Fahner still gets emotional when he talks about Val. He struggled to regain his composure.

“She had the resolve to make the absolute best out of her situation,” he said. “No one her age should have to go through what Val had to go through.

“The tragedy is that she isn’t here to accept it,” Fahner said. “But I don’t want anyone to think that this award is more important because she’s dead. It’s Val’s life that is our legacy.”

Valerie planned a career as a pediatric oncologist, and had a special recognition of the fear and uncertainty of other young people who fought cancer. In addition to being a peer counselor for other cancer-stricken teens, Val was the Children’s Miracle Network “Miracle Child” last spring, delivering powerful televised messages about children with cancer to West Michigan.

“Val responded to a diagnosis of cancer with a determination to go beyond, become better, appreciate more,” Morris said. “You stood next to her and you could just sense that she was special.”

Her brother, Matt, knew it. But he points out that Val wanted to just be a normal teen-ager, “just like everybody else.” Lover of sports, malls, movies, his sister, he said, “was an everyday girl. She loved gymnastics, volleyball and basketball. She loved going to the mall with her friends, talking about boys and things.”

And the two children of Eric and Cathie Trasky were very close.

“We talked about things,” said Matt, 18. “About a lot of things. We were really close. A lot of people didn’t realize how close.”

Cathie Trasky says Val’s Tribute Award “will be a nice memory for us, to know that other people appreciated the things about her that we love.”

“She was always upbeat, never felt sorry for herself, and that’s an inspiration for everybody,” Val’s mother said. “As parents you always want your kids to think about other people, to care. Val cared a lot.”

Valerie called her grandparents her best friends. She said the wig she got when chemotherapy caused her hair to fall out “wasn’t her,” and tossed it aside in favor of a stylish hat for every outfit. When she got sick and had to give up volleyball, she took up crafts — and gave all her creations away.

And she had friends who stuck by her. She and best friend Angie Heintz talked on the phone constantly and strung fishing line across the 100 feet that separated their houses so they could send notes back and forth.

“Val had a wonderful support network in her peers,” Morris said. “Sometimes when teenagers go through something like this there’s a feeling of isolation. These kids rallied around her.”

She was something special

On the day of Valerie’s last chemotherapy session, her mom secretly arranged for a limousine to pick her up.

“All her classmates showed up to surprise her,” Morris recalled. “The lobby was filled with kids and teachers and balloons. People were hugging her, hugging each other. It was truly a day of celebration.”

The young woman touched the hearts of the medical staff in a profound way, Morris said. “We all just treasured her,” she said. “She had this special quality — you got something from knowing Val, from her beauty, her strength, her leadership, her joy. Even when she was feeling poorly, that sparkle would come through. We miss her like crazy.

“One of her dreams was to write a book about her experiences that would be hopeful and helpful for other teens,” Morris said. “She chose in her mind that this would not be an ending. She planned to make a difference to other people.”

That’s what her brother, Matt, wants, too.

“Hopefully people who learn about her now will be touched,” Matt said quietly. “She sure touched a lot of people when she was alive. She was really special.”

Elizabeth Dole breaks down barriers so children can reach their potential

COMMUNITY SERVICE

The Grand Rapids Press

Betsy Dole sees things differently than most people, through a lens of compassion.

Dole was a social worker for five years before marrying her husband, Stanley, 35 years ago. Once married, she didn't work outside the home, she says. It's the understatement of the decade.

In every aspect of her life and in all of her many volunteer activities, Dole has demonstrated her deep commitment to breaking down barriers that keep minorities, children and women from realizing their potential.

Her church, Smith Congregational, is across the street from Hall Elementary School. A racially mixed school of children whose parents, for the most part, didn't finish high school and are mired in poverty, Hall had special needs, and Dole was determined to help meet them.

In 1985 she was instrumental in starting Homework House, an after-school tutoring program that is now a model for other school programs.

Starting with a few children in one big room at the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan, Homework House now serves up to half of all Hall Elementary School students in their classrooms after school and has been extended into Burton and Westwood middle schools.

Volunteer tutors help with homework, lend an ear, and become a valuable source of support.

"Children need more than their parents and teachers," says Dole, who turns 62 Wednesday, the day of the Tribute luncheon. "They need people in the community to believe that they're good, they have potential. And they need it when they're young. If they don't believe in themselves by the time they get to middle school, they're at great risk of dropping out."

She believes one person can make a difference — especially if the person walks into an elementary school and asks the principal, "What can I do?"

"We need to be less judgmental," says Dole, a mother of three. "We need to look beyond how a child looks or behaves, and try to understand the extra burdens the child may have. Maybe he's not getting the love and support at home every child needs. Maybe she left home hungry, or her father just walked out. But all we see is a child misbehaving, a child doing poorly in school."

"The children at Hall School are just as bright, just as delightful and have as much potential as the children in our own homes and churches," she says.

Homework House is a project of United Church Outreach Ministry, a program Dole founded through the United Church of Christ Churches in the Grand Rapids area. The ministry started as a way to stock local food banks, but Dole, in typical fashion, wanted to do more.

Deeply involved in United Way as a volunteer, Dole also is active in the St. Cecilia Music Society, Pilgrim Manor Retirement Home and her church choir. She has challenged all the boards and



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ELIZABETH DOLE

committees on which she has served to include women and people of color.

Most recently, Dole has shown dynamic leadership at Olivet College in responding to racial tensions there in the spring of 1992. This is her ninth year on the Olivet board, and the second as its president.

At the time, the college had a minority population of 8 percent, but no minority faculty or staff. The majority of white students are from small, rural communities in Michigan. The majority of black students are from Detroit.

"Put these two groups together without addressing their communication needs, and that was the underlying problem," Dole says. "Racism is an issue on virtually every campus in this country. We need to create a climate where we can talk to each other, learn about each other, value each other."

She has been instrumental in developing multi-culturalism workshops for students and faculty; adding courses on African American issues and hiring more African American teachers and administrators.

"White people will say to me, 'Have you solved the problem yet?'" Dole says. "Racism is not going to be 'solved' any time soon. We have to work at it, day by day. We have to infuse cultural diversity into the fabric of our institution, not just add a few workshops and courses."

Together with the new college president, Dole is working to reinvent Olivet, founded in 1844 as the first college in Michigan open to women and minorities.

"It's even more important today than in 1844," she says, "for us all to get along."

Women who own businesses have a loyal ally

BUSINESS/INDUSTRY

The Grand Rapids Press

If you're a woman and a new business owner in town, check your mailbox — there might be a note of encouragement from Jane Ross. Maybe even an invitation to lunch.

Ross knows that books, seminars and success videos can't replace what women business owners need most: moral support.

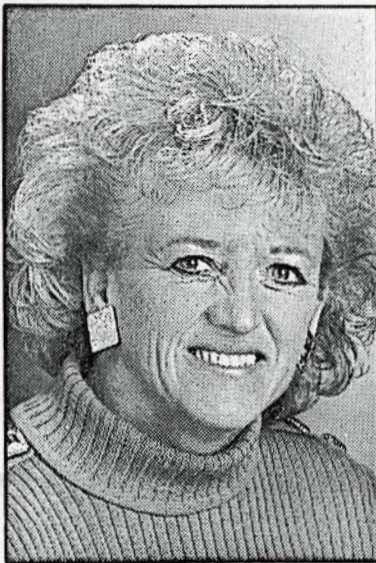
Owner of her own marketing and communications firm, Ross & Associates, and a sales promotions firm, Ross Sales Promotions, Ross is a savvy, energetic advocate for women-owned businesses.

"No matter how good of a staff you have, there are decisions the owner has to make on her own," says Ross, 48. "There's a certain solitude about business ownership. There are things you can get from other women in your shoes that I don't know if you could get anywhere else."

Before striking out on her own Ross headed marketing and communications for the health/science division of Herman Miller, where she was twice named outstanding employee of the year.

She says she loved her work, but wanted more. The grounding she gained at Herman Miller gave her the confidence to open her first business in 1985. The second opened in 1989. She knows now it was the right decision.

"Not only do I have the decision-making authority, but I have the accountability for those decisions," Ross says. "If my decisions are good, the business will prosper and grow. If not, I've learned a lesson."



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JANE ROSS

When Ross sees a void in services to women business owners, she quickly moves to fill it. She's one of the creators of the local EXCEL program, a training resource for women business owners.

"There's a whole body of women out there who never thought of themselves as

candidates for business ownership," says Ross, a board member and trainer for the program. Bringing EXCEL to Grand Rapids, through a Small Business Administration grant and raising matching funds, was vital, she said. "When women see a program with a 'women' nametag on it, they realize there's hope and opportunity."

Chair for two successive terms of the Michigan Alliance of Women Business Owners, Ross says women business owners are an undervalued and untapped resource. By the year 2000 more than half of small businesses will be owned by women, she says.

When she started her business, Ross knew there would be obstacles, but she didn't consider being a woman one of them. "I had long been a female in a male-oriented profession, but I soon learned that if I did a good job, I could overcome that," she says. "You learn over the years to ignore the resistance."

But she soon realized there weren't many resources available to help her.

Most other programs for women business owners are for start-up companies, she says. She knew that existing business owners could use help, which is where EXCEL comes in. The program serves young businesses, but also gives veteran business owners updated skills in marketing, financial management, human resources.

"The biggest help for me was the women business owners group," Ross said. "We shared horror stories, learned we didn't all have to make the same mistakes. Once one of us made one, the rest of us could learn from it."



TRIBUTE TO WOMEN

Now she offers that kind of support on a more personal level, over lunch, through notes or phone calls. And she routinely visits high school and college classes, offering inspiration.

Ross is active at the state level, too, serving her second term as chair of the Michigan Alliance of Women Business Owners. Her current project is to identify and profile all 134,000 women business owners in the state, and create a consortium to provide training resources statewide.

In the local chamber of commerce she has been vice chair and chair for five years of the U.S. Small Business Week seminar and training programs for small businesses. In 1990 she received the Small Business Administration's Women's Business Advocate Award.

But she still finds time for the notes, the phone calls, the lunches — the support system you don't learn about at seminars.

"Going from a manager to heading up an entity, having people relying on you for their livelihood, that's very scary," Ross says. "It helps tremendously to have other women's support."

Determined achiever views successes as beginnings to the next challenge

PROFESSIONS

The Grand Rapids Press

No matter how successful we become, we're never too important to listen to our mothers.

Margaret Sellers has had an impressive career and enough community involvement for 10 people. But when she talks about how she got to where she is today, she talks about Mom.

"Mom always said, 'Anything worth doing is worth doing right,'" says Sellers, professor of public administration at Grand Valley State University. "And you could bet that if we didn't do it right, we'd be doing it over."

Sellers has a history of doing things once, doing them well and moving on to the next challenge.

She was the first woman and first African American to head the personnel division of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. She was assistant Grand Rapids city manager for administrative and cultural services and is credited with transforming that office into an expanded human resources department. It merged the city's personnel, employee development and risk management departments.

She was instrumental in raising thousands of dollars for Baxter Community Center and is currently fund raising for the Family Outreach Center. In the six years she has been in Grand Rapids, she has been a United Way

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MARGARET SELLERS

volunteer and on the board of directors of the Grand Rapids Symphony, Dwelling Place, Blodgett Memorial Medical Center, the Grand Rapids Art Museum, the Dyer-Ives Foundation and the Council for the Humanities. She co-chairs "Legacy 1994" for the Women's History Month project and co-chaired the successful millage drive for the Grand Rapids Public Library.

She also is an adult companion and mentor to a young woman through the Youth Companion Program. And in her spare time, the mother of two daughters and grandmother of three likes to roller skate.

"My parents instilled in me the idea



that you truly can become anything you want to be, even though they were caring for seven children with limited resources," says Sellers, born in South Carolina and later raised in Detroit. "We knew that we had the best that could be offered. People said we were poor, but we never knew it. I knew I had everything I needed, and most everything I wanted.

"My mom made our clothes, Dad fixed our shoes and worked two jobs, but they were always guiding us to the very best, wanting the best for us," she says. "I thought I could be president if I wanted to be. That was a great foundation."

And she has continued to build.

Arts flourish through efforts of 'non-artist'

ARTS/COMMUNICATION

Stories by Terri Finch Hamilton
The Grand Rapids Press

Julie Christianson Stivers is quick to make the point: "I'm not an artist," she says. But the tireless advocate of the arts has helped paint a picture of Grand Rapids that shows off its artistic energy and diversity.

Founding editor of "On The Town," Grand Rapids' first arts and entertainment magazine, her involvement in the local arts community has included the Grand Rapids Symphony, the Chamber Music Society, Grand Rapids Film Theatre, the Urban Institute of Contemporary Arts, the Grand Rapids Arts Council and St. Cecilia Music Society.

Stivers, 43, a free-lance writer, has worked diligently on the board of directors for the UICA for more than seven years, serving as president for the past five years. As president, she has overseen vigorous fund raising and has been integral in bringing exhibits and multi-media events to Grand Rapids.

She held the organization together as it has struggled through the loss of its building on Race Street and spearheaded the campaign to find the interim location downtown. Now she volunteers 20 to 30 hours a week helping the organization maintain its footing while it raises funds for a permanent home.

Stivers says her love of the arts budded in eighth grade, when the teacher in her one-room country schoolhouse in St. Ignace played classical music on the record player. High school band and art classes and a college art appreciation class fueled her interest, and Stivers firmly believes every child should have early exposure to the arts.

"Art education is so important for young people," says Stivers, married to John Stivers for nine years. "Kids who don't get it are deprived. Art shouldn't be a special thing after school, where a special teacher comes in or you go to a special room. It should be a regular part of education."

Because adults need exposure to the arts, too, Stivers helped found "On the Town" magazine in 1982. Though she and partners Tim Goodwin and Melissa Madura-Altman have sold the publication, Stivers still talks with pride about their mission.

"A friend once told me 'On the Town' makes Grand Rapids look better than it really is," Stivers chuckles. "We didn't make anything up — everything we



“ Art education is so important for young people. Kids who don't get it are deprived. ”

JULIE C. STIVERS

printed really happened. But put all together in one spot it showed what a great community Grand Rapids is for arts and entertainment. The sidewalks don't roll up at night."

Especially not at the UICA, which Stivers calls "an oasis for artists and audience to get together.

"At the UICA there are no walls between artist and audience," she says. "You can smell the paint from the artists' studios, see what artists trying to make a living look like. That kind of direct contact is a great thing."

She has a soft spot for the visual arts.

"Of all the arts, visual arts is the hardest to get support for," Stivers says. "People don't pay to go see an exhibit the way they'll pay to hear a concert. People don't take dates to the art museum."

Although she, for one, thinks it's a great idea.

"There's a lot broader arts spectrum now than 20 years ago," Stivers says. "It used to be just for the rich and famous, but not anymore. Festival has helped that a lot. It gets people into the arts without making the big commitment of dressing up and going to DeVos Hall."

Art can take place anywhere, Stivers says. She wishes everyone could draw from it what she does — a kind of inner peace.

"Art is kind of like church for me," she says. "I'm not religious, in an organized religion sense. Walking into the UICA with my plate of cheese and crackers for an opening is like Mom and Dad going to the church social back in St. Ignace. It's a way to experience the spiritual side of life, to examine, express, grow and learn — about life and myself."

At 84, Sister Agnes Thiel preaches gospel of power in 'the third age'

Stories by Terri Finch Hamilton
The Grand Rapids Press

ADVOCACY

Think "senior citizen power" and you might not think 84-year-old Dominican nun. Until you meet Sister Agnes Thiel.

At the top of her list of things to do before she's 100 is harnessing the torrential power of a group of citizens she says don't even realize they have it.

From the halls of the state capitol to the White House lawn to Grand Rapids church socials, Sister Thiel preaches her gospel of "the Third Age." It's that time in one's life between retirement and ill health — a valuable time she says is so vastly wasted.

"Getting third-agers motivated is a very difficult task," she says. "They grew up with the idea that when one gets old, life is finished. But third-agers have their health, experience. They've got 20 or 30 good years after retirement, but they don't know it. We're a pioneer group of people."

And she's a pioneer among them.

Honored for 20 years of advocating for seniors on the local, regional and state levels, Sister Thiel has taught grassroots advocacy to seniors, started organizations that promote senior involvement in the political process and lobbied persistently for key legislation for seniors.

Sister Thiel founded and served as president of the Senior Citizens' Senate of Kent County, recognized as the model for senior advocacy in Michigan. She is chairperson of the Advisory Council of the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan, the agency which plans, coordinates and distributes federal funds for seniors in a nine-county area. She was instrumental in forming the Aging Network Legislative Committee in 1985, bringing together seniors, service providers and state legislators to discuss important state legislation.

Sister Thiel helped establish and chaired for three years Senior Power Day, the largest senior advocacy event in the nation. She serves on the Michigan Senior Advocates Council, a state-wide advocacy group.

A native of Ludington, Sister Thiel retired at Marywood in 1973 after 40 years as a secondary school teacher and administrator in the Saginaw Diocese.

Then she really started working. "When I retired, retirement was a



“We are the people who have the wisdom, the experience, the time.”

SISTER AGNES THIEL

negative word," she says. "Nobody wanted to retire. Now people can't wait to retire. You take the first year and do everything you always wanted to do. And then what do you do?"

You need only ask.

"No legislator can know everything, they have to depend on the people," she says. "Third-agers have the time, they can study, they can communicate. They can make a difference."

She wants to create an organization in Grand Rapids of all the retired community leaders.

"I want to take the retiring Grand Rapids leaders and show them what the third age is all about," she says with a grin. "Show them that life can be better because they've been there. We really are happiest when we're helping other people."

She must be the happiest woman in town.

For more than 20 years she has taught women how to stand up for themselves in the political process. Her personal involvement has resulted in laws which