

"Federation Corner" column
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Calling all young people...or some, at least

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During the twelve years I have been a delegate to the Montgomery County Civic Federation, I have known thirteen colleagues who "died in the saddle." That's an old cowboy expression for someone who passes on to the next world while still working--in this case, working as civic activists for the betterment of the county.

That number seems high to me, given that only two of my co-workers passed away during the seventeen years I worked in the Office of the Director at the National Institutes of Health.

Not to make light of it, but maybe the high number of activists who "die with their boots on" (another old cowboy expression) is due to the fact that we deal with county government bureaucrats and elected officials on a regular basis. Or maybe it is because many volunteer government watchdogs, and advocates for improved quality of life, are those in their senior years. Younger people have families to rear and careers to manage; still, I encourage them to attend Federation meetings and see if the work interests them.

I am sure there were other former activists or MCCF delegates who died during the last twelve years; and I mean them no disrespect by not including them in this article. But the men and women listed below were all instrumental in shaping me as a civic advocate--as mentors, or role models, or close working partners.

When I met Edward Pickens in 2002 he was President of the Chevy Chase West Neighborhood Association, located on the west side of Wisconsin Avenue south of Bethesda. Ed was a fierce defender of his community, and educated me on the negative impacts a rapidly developing urban area can have on edge neighborhoods.

Alice Helm was a broad spectrum activist from Kenwood Park Citizens Association in Bethesda, paired with husband, Lew, who was an MCCF delegate for years. Alice joined me in a fight against an unlawful zoning code amendment passed by the County Council in 2002, which was eventually ordered rescinded by the Circuit Court. Though short in stature, she sat tall when chastising Council members, who knew what they had done was wrong, by saying "So now what do you do? You correct your mistake...and then you don't do it again."

Don Barclay lived in English Village, west of Bethesda, and showed me that overseeing the growth of an area meant more than just monitoring building projects. In the early 2000s, Don and I worked with county Department of Transportation staff to help Bethesda become the first fully handicapped accessible urban area in the county.

George Sauer was one of the granddaddies of the Federation when I met him in the 2002. An MCCF delegate from Regency Estates Citizens Association in Rockville, George had already served as MCCF President in 1974, filling out the remaining term of a President who had moved away. He served as President again from 1984 to 1986. George was his community's Federation representative for more than thirty years. As Alice Helm told me, and it applied to George, "civic activism is not a sprint...it's a marathon."

I met Stuart Rochester when he was serving as a Civic Federation delegate from Columbia Road Citizens Association in Burtonsville. He was one of the citizen representatives who worked on what was referred to as "The Concordia," a simultaneous master planning effort for four communities on the east side of the county. He showed me that planning one community's growth should not occur in a vacuum, as the development in an area is affected by and affects neighboring areas

Wayne Goldstein was an activist without equal. A delegate to the Civic Federation from Kensington Heights Citizens Association, he served at one time or other on every Federation committee, and was also MCCF President from 2006 to 2008. Wayne actually did pass away in 2009 "with his boots on," collapsing on the way in to the Suburban Hospital rezoning hearing, where he was advocating the neighbors' position for the Federation.

Norman Latker, John Bruce and Bill English were all activists from my neighborhood, the Edgemoor Citizens Association in Bethesda. Norm introduced me to the Civic Federation and served alongside me as a fellow delegate for years. John was our group's delegate to the Police Advisory Board, and regularly walked around Bethesda monitoring construction projects. And Bill showed me that one can be a fierce advocate on an issue, yet still do it with class and show the opposition respect...when they deserve it.

Marvin Weinman served as Chair of the MCCF Public Finance Committee for years and, by virtue of that position, was also a member of the Executive Committee charged with running the Federation. Marv always had an encouraging word, and was a true gentleman but also a ferocious fiscal watchdog.

Of all my mentors, Malcolm Rivkin was the most knowledgeable on land planning matters. A member of Battery Park Citizens Association in Bethesda, Mal partnered with me in countless rezoning battles, always fighting to lessen the negative impact of new development projects on those living nearby.

Bill Schrader was a Federation delegate from Layhill South Citizens Association in Silver Spring, and served as MCCF Treasurer for the last five years of his life. He had a nose that could sniff out a bureaucrat or politician's "b s", and always had a curmudgeonly comment accompanied by wagging finger.

Lee Shipman was an MCCF delegate from Bannockburn Civic Association in Bethesda for more than ten years. In her prime, she broke through the glass ceiling as one of the first female architects with a Washington area firm. Though bent with age and well into her eighties, Lee continued to attend Federation meetings until her death earlier this year.

To this day, I miss them all.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to montgomerycivic@yahoo.com