

# Wilder's legacy will be volunteer leadership



Ethel Wilder relaxes at home with her piano

(Sun-photo by Richard Hunt)

CHELMSFORD - At age 81, Chelmsford resident Ethel Wilder's lifelong commitment to volunteer service has kept her actively involved in the life of her community.

Born on the same day as the San Francisco earthquake - April 18, 1906 - Wilder's rise to leadership of volunteer organizations and the fulfillment that comes with it parallels the City by the Bay's rebirth from rubble.

Wilder said she always believed that she could achieve her potential despite the roadblocks of poverty and lack of schooling along the way.

She said she has worked not only towards her own fulfillment, but also to convince others that "you can do it, too."

"Any woman can reach her potential. If you can't go on to school, you can find ways to grow," Wilder said.

Wilder's legacy of volunteer leadership in Greater Lowell goes back more than half a century.

She was one of 11 children born to Mr. and Mrs. Fred Timmins. Her father worked for 50 years for the John C. Meyer Thread Mill, which moved from Boston to Middlesex Street in Lowell in 1909. Her family moved to nearby Princeton Boulevard.

Wilder credits her parents with instilling good samaritan ethics in their children. She said her father, a British immigrant and a lay preacher, emphasized: "If you children do a service, don't just go the two miles. Go six.' He taught us that we had to give of ourselves," a standard she has passed on to her children.

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She had to forego college in order to help put food on the table, so upon graduation from Lowell High School in 1925, Wilder joined her father at the mill.

"Your mother stood at the door when you came with the pay envelope and just took it," Wilder said, recalling how the family helped each other through economic hardships.

Four years after her marriage to her Lowell High School sweetheart, Donald Wilder, who was a third-generation operator of the Wilder Grain Co., the couple bought a house on Warren Avenue in Chelmsford and moved in on July 4, 1933.

### 'Chicken coops'

Their desire was "to live in the country," Wilder said, a description that aptly applied to Chelmsford in those days with its

"horses, chicken coops, and roosters crowing in the morning."

Donald had told her that he didn't want her working for money, Wilder said, but encouraged her to be active as a volunteer "to reach her potential."

Wilder's mother-in-law made her initial volunteer efforts possible by offering to babysit and suggesting that Ethel serve at the YWCA. Since then, her service has been wide-ranging.

"The greatest joy of my life was staying with the March of Dimes until the Salk vaccine was perfected," Wilder said. "In 1955, approximately 4,000 people were stricken with polio in Massachusetts," whereas there was "just one incident after everyone was inoculated."

She called being chosen chairman of Woman's Day for the 300th anniversary celebra-

tion in Chelmsford in 1955 "the thrill of my life."

Among her other fond memories is her stewardship at the Lowell YWCA from 1942 to 1945, "when we sent the girls up to Fort Devens to dance with the soldiers - and I was the chaperone."

Another YWCA activity was the Industrial Girls Club "for young women who didn't go on to high school to work in the mills," she said.

The Lowell General Hospital Auxiliary, which Wilder headed, also "held teas for the mill girls, exposed them to the nicer things of life," she said.

Wilder's then future daughter-in-law, Bonnie Wilder, many years later would write and produce "Spindle City Sisters," a musical about Lowell's mills and the girls who worked in them.

### 'Radio ministry'

From 1972 to 1975, Ethel Wilder had a Sunday morning "radio ministry" in Lowell, for which the Greater Lowell Council of Churches presented her a commemorative plaque.

Once she preached a sermon about volunteering at Hope Congregational Church in Lawrence.

Fund-raising efforts were different in the old days, too, Wilder remembered. "You had to put the bag under the mattress, because there wasn't a bank in Chelmsford," she said.

By the late 1950s, Wilder's volunteer expertise resulted in a surprising turn of events.

Wilder received a telephone call saying: "They need an executive house mother to open the first women's dormitory at Lowell State College," she said in a recent interview.

Then Lowell State President Daniel Leary explained: "You'll have to buy the groceries and handle the girls' food money (\$4 a week rent for each of 30 girls)."

She said she also "set up the plan for them to do the work, such as washing dishes, helping with the meals and cleaning."

"I was 52 years old and had never paid into Social Security," she said of her lack of "paid" experience. Nevertheless, "the next day, Dr. Leary hired me... My volunteer work was my college degree and my foot in the door."

For the next 18 years, until she retired at age 70, Ethel Wilder was a working woman, earning a pension that today pays the rent for her three-room apartment, five years after her husband died.

The first 10 were spent as the dormitory's daytime house mother. She was known as "Mother Wilder" to her charges. "I've had many wonderful letters from the girls over the years, telling me of their marriages and children," she said.

One of those girls, in fact, would become her daughter-in-law, due largely to Mother Wilder's match-making talent.

"Bonnie came into my dormitory and was there two or three months as a live-in student. And I said to one of the house mothers, 'There's a girl that I would like for a daughter-in-law.'"

"My son was a lieutenant colonel of the ROTC at Lowell Tech," she continued. "He came home one day and said he

needed a girl for the Grand March. I said, 'I've got the girl for you.'"

"They've been married 19 years and have two sons," Wilder said.

Even more surprising than the Lowell State job offer was another overture. When she was 62, Tewksbury Hospital Superintendent Thomas J. Saunders asked her to be the institution's first professional director of volunteer services.

"I started talking to the church women," Wilder told of recruiting volunteers for the hospital, which included units for the treatment of alcoholics, the mentally ill, unwed mothers, crippled children and the chronically ill. "We needed people mostly at noon to feed the patients."

In addition, Wilder coordinated charitable efforts by women's groups to make and donate items, such as 500 colorful afghans for lap robes. "I had no budget at all. I had to go out and find the workers."

Among her memories from Tewksbury are four watercolor paintings of dancing clowns on her bedroom wall. The clowns were by "Tony," a 55-year-old alcoholic who died of a liver ailment shortly after he finished the paintings.

Wilder also recalls working for five years in the crippled children's unit where she taught painting, music and games. A

special memory is of the "little girl who learned to paint with the magic marker held between her toes."

Last year, Wilder served as president of the women's fellowship at the Chelmsford Central Congregational Church.

As a former president of the Chelmsford Historical Society, she remains active in that organization. On the second and fourth Sunday afternoons of each month, she serves as a guide at the Barrett-Byam Homestead and is also the "chairman of the house" at the town's museum located on Byam Road.

"I've really had a rich, full life," Wilder said. "My biggest hobby now is putting together these scrapbooks and albums, making a life history for each of my children, picture albums for all the grandchildren."



"I have kept scrapbooks ever since I was a little girl. If my children want to return these to the organizations after I'm gone, it would be a history," she said, referring to albums devoted to each of the organizations she served.

Two of her children, Nancy Dziczek and John Wilder, reside in Chelmsford and have joined their mother in volunteering for the historical society. Her oldest daughter, Elizabeth Tewksbury, lives with her family in Charlottesville, Va.

Wilder also has one granddaughter and five grandsons.

## Long record

CHELMSFORD — Ethel Wilder has served as a volunteer for the following organizations.

— **Chelmsford Historical Society:** 15 years on the board of directors; four years as president.

— **Lowell Goodwill Industries:** 25 years on the board of directors, two years as president of women's auxiliary.

— **Tewksbury Hospital:** Twice appointed to the board of trustees, eight years director of volunteer services.

— **Greater Lowell YWCA:** 25 years on the board of directors, four years as president.

— **March of Dimes:** 18 years, several of those as chairman for the Mothers' March in Chelmsford. Also chaired drives for the American Red Cross and American Cancer Society.

— **Lowell State College:** 10 years as house mother for first women's dormitory.

— **Chelmsford Republican Party:** finance chairman.

— **Chelmsford Community Chest:** general chairman.

— **Lowell General Hospital Women's Guild:** president.

— **Greater Lowell Church Women United:** president.

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— Ethel Wilder  
Lifelong volunteer

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# Church honors Ethel Wilder's volunteer work

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Ethel T. Wilder holds the silver bowl presented to her by the diaconate of the Central Congregational Church in Chelmsford. (Photo by John Lawlor)

CHELMSFORD — Mrs. Donald (Ethel) Wilder, one of the town's most senior volunteers, celebrated her 87th birthday this spring.

She read the scripture of the day at the Central Congregational Church. The diaconate presented her with a silver bowl for her 60 years of service and friends

and relatives and members of the congregation celebrated with a cake at the church's coffee hour.

Her family, including, Skippy and Charles Tewksbury from Virginia, Nancy and Gene Diczek and John and Bonnie Wilder of Chelmsford had a catered party to celebrate the birthday.

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