

County History Peppered with Influential Women

March 2009

By Jo Ellen Litz

Women in Business and Higher Education

Lebanon County has been blessed with women who are movers and shakers, somehow balancing their personal lives with fulltime jobs and serving on boards for a better business and educational climate. Women's views benefit boards not because they are better, but because they are different from a man's perspective.

For example, in 1972, **Jane B. Parker** became the first woman to break the glass ceiling as an elected member on the Board of Directors for the Lebanon Valley Chamber of Commerce. As a mother raising three children--Attorney Wiley Parker, Joan Daubich, and Patty Monar--, Jane owned and operated Parker Collection Agency, which served the hospital and local businesses, and she collected delinquent taxes.

Her parents were Lloyd and Anne Boyer, who owned Boyer Printing where Jane had worked for a short time. Jane was also the first woman member of the vestry board at St. Luke's Episcopal Church. She's gone now, but has earned her place in Lebanon County women's history.

Next, **Wendy DeMatteo Holsinger** served as the first woman on the Board of the Lebanon Valley Economic Development Corporation. Wendy is the chief executive officer of ASK Foods and Today's Chef. She is also a Lebanon Valley Farmers Bank board member. Finally, Wendy serves as co-chair of the Team Pennsylvania Foundation.

Likewise, **Jody Kasperowicz** was the first woman on the Board of the Center of Lebanon Association where she served for seven years and coordinated CLA's Holiday parades and New Year's Eve bologna drops. Since selling her Downtown Mini Mall in 2003 to make room for the Lebanon Farmer's Market parking area, she has been selling real estate.

At Lebanon Valley College, **Dr. Elizabeth Kreiser Weisburger** broke the mold. In 1969 she was elected to the Board by the alumni where she served for nineteen years, the last years (1985-89) as the Board Chair.

Elizabeth was brought up in Ono, Lebanon County. Her parents were Amy and Raymond Krieser. Elizabeth married John Weisburger, a chemist, and they had three children.

Elizabeth said that she wasn't the first person up a mountain, but "I got things going. I wasn't going to start any new buildings, but in 1980 Dr. Sample was the

president, and we had an agonizing discussion about starting the science building. Afterwards, I went to a chemical society meeting to present a paper in Las Vegas. After seeing all of that money squandered on gambling, we did start the science building.”

After graduating from LVC in 1940, Dr. Weisburger went on to the University of Cincinnati to earn a PhD in organic chemistry, then beginning in 1951, worked at the National Cancer Institute for forty years, retiring as the highest grade scientist for the US Public Health Service, which she said is like a captain in the navy.

According to LVC, “It was Weisburger who, in the 1970s, initiated the investigation of the fire retardant that was used to make children’s sleepwear, but was later banned. She established the National Toxicology Program at NIH in Bethesda, Md., that investigated the carcinogenic potential of hair dyes, food additives, drugs, environmental pollutants, and many products used by industry, such as the antioxidants in rubber tires.

Not only did she serve as a chemist at the National Cancer Institute, with special expertise in chemical carcinogenesis and toxicology, but she also established the analytical methods and research protocols that have led to our understanding of how those chemicals metabolize to cause cancer. Those methods, in turn, have led to a rational, scientific basis for finding ways to control the disease and for removing harmful chemicals from the environment.

After retiring in Maryland, she launched a second career as a consultant, served as an expert witness, and continued to write for and edit journals in her field. She is the author of some 240 professional articles and various book chapters.”

Finally, **Mary Louise Sherk** was the first woman to receive the Founder’s Day Award from Lebanon Valley College. She said, “I was the third recipient—following Representative Jack Seltzer and Vernon Bishop. It was the most memorable award that I received.” Mary Louise was married to Carl R. Sherk, MD, who died from cancer in 1979. They had three children.

Mary Louise is best known for her love of education. She shepherded both the Boost II and Head Start programs in Lebanon County. “In 1968, the County Commissioners were approached to organize a Head Start Program, but volunteers were told that there was no poverty in Lebanon County. The organizers knew differently, and started the Boost and Boost II Programs, which were fashioned after Head Start.” Mary Louise visited Harrisburg and Lancaster’s programs to find out how they worked. Two United Methodist churches, the first at St. Paul’s on North 8th Street and then Covenant on North 9th Street provided housing for the Boost II program during the school year. In the summer, the priest at St. Mary’s Church created a Boost program for pre-school children. Mary Louise taught 12-16 students at a time. Tina Washington, an elementary teacher with the Lebanon School district and later recognized as

Pennsylvania's Teacher of the Year, held evening meetings for the parents while Mary Louise conducted home visits—to get to know the parents who were invited to a free clothing bank, which was open one day each week.

Eventually, IU13 applied for funding to open a Head Start program. So, beginning in 1979, Lebanon County had an official Head Start Program, and Mary Louise was hired as the Education Coordinator where she worked until retiring at age 70. In 1996, Lebanon City Schools and Head Start combined services, and became known as K4, and she coordinated the program for Lebanon City Schools.

In homes, Mary Louise taught English as a second language, Reach Out and Read at the Good Samaritan Hospital, and currently serves as a Board Member of the Lebanon County Library, and is Board Chair of the Lebanon County Housing and Redevelopment Authority. Mary Louise is also a member of the League of Women Voters. She currently resides at Cornwall Manor.

To Jane B. Parker, Wendy DeMatteo Holsinger, Jody Kasperowicz, Dr. Elizabeth Kreiser Weisburger, and Mary Louise Sherk, the women of today owe you a debt of gratitude for leading the way for women to hold positions of influence in Lebanon County.