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Advocate for mental illness a valued name

Telegraph, The (Nashua, NH) - Saturday, March 28, 2009

Everybody, it seems, has a Betty Winberg story.

I have tons.

One of my favorites is from 1994, when, in my previous life as chief photographer, I was covering President Bill Clinton's visit to Nashua. It was a tough time for the prez - the Whitewater scandal was threatening to inundate was threatening to inundate him and Hillary.

Betty was in the crowd. She listened to Clinton speak, then, as Betty will do, jumped into the Q&A fray. "Whitewater is for canoeing and rafting," she blurted, sending chuckles through the crowd and giving Clinton what was likely his first laugh in days.

"Shame on those who would detract and distract from the important work you're doing with universal health coverage and jobs," Betty added, to applause and a big Clinton smile.

"Bless you," he nodded.

Such is an ideally representative snapshot into the spirit of Betty Winberg, one of the most recognizable and valued names in the local, regional, and even national world of nonprofits and advocacy organizations. Having climbed past 80 now, Betty leans on a cane to walk, but the sturdy shoulders and inner strength that have helped advance social issues and advocate for people with mental illness for three decades are as solid as ever.

But despite the length and depth of Betty's dedication to making the world a better place, she much prefers sticking to the shadows rather than stepping into the limelight. It's one of the elements, her many friends and associates will quickly agree, that add up to Betty's trademark selflessness and authenticity.

So it will be a milestone, really, when Betty takes center stage with six other guests-of-the-hour Tuesday, April 7, at the American Red Cross' NH Gateway Chapter's sixth annual Heroes Breakfast at Crowne Plaza hotel.

"Initially I said 'no thanks,' " Betty said this week, reacting not out of ingratitude but pushed by her trademark modesty. "But then I thought, 'well . . . OK, because it will put a good light on **Harbor Homes** and RISE.' "

Indeed, of all Betty's endeavors, Nashua-based **Harbor Homes** and RISE - Rivier College's senior education program - are closest to her heart. She was in on both organizations' formative days and months, lending her firm but respectful persuasive powers when they were most needed.

Betty, who was selected in the "senior hero" category, will be joined by William Grinley of Pelham, the military hero; Wayne Gibson of Worthen Industries of Nashua, the first-responder hero; John Bowen of Foodee's Pizza in Milford, the good Samaritan hero; Samita Mohanasundaram of Nashua, the youth hero; Rick Holden of Hampshire Hills, Milford, the community impact hero; and the only four-footed honoree, "Til," a member of the Salem Police Department's K-9 Corps, who is the pet hero.

Not surprisingly, the Red Cross comes up on the long list of organizations that Betty has served. "Oh, that was many years ago - I used to fold bandages for them in the 40's," she said, recalling her part in

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the much-heralded home-front war effort.

"Later, I taught swimming and CPR for them too," she adds.

While Betty declines, with a coy little smile, to name her nominator, her honor is focused on her work with **Harbor Homes** and her dedication to advancing community-based assistance for people with mental illness and reducing stigma through awareness and education programs.

It's been 30 years since Betty pulled up stakes and moved to Nashua from the Bedford, Mass., area when her employer, the former Digital Equipment Corp., relocated its executive sales staff to its new complex in Merrimack. A Massachusetts native, she married and moved to the Philadelphia area, where she and her husband raised three children.

The marriage ended in divorce. Their daughter, Amy, went on to become an equine veterinarian in rural Pennsylvania. But a different set of challenges was in store for their two sons.

Both developed symptoms of mental illness in their late teens and early 20's, Betty says. The elder son, Ross, was diagnosed while a freshman at Penn State University. Not long after starting treatment and moving into a group home, though, he wanted to "come home" to New England and see his mom.

"It was a time when families hid their (mentally ill) kids from the world," Betty says, her brow furrowing as she recollects society's general ignorance of mental illness at the time. "They (people with mental illness) were isolated, shunned - so few at the time understood that (mental illness) is the same as having diabetes or a heart problem."

Armed with pounds of research and a ton of will, Betty and other advocates she'd befriended - among them the late Dot Colson, another giant in mental-health care advances - descended upon Community Council of Nashua, the only community-based health agency around in those days, and began working their magic.

"We told them, 'We need to do something about housing,' " Betty says, remembering how she fretted over the only option for people with mental illness - among them her own son - available at the time.

"He'd been warehoused at the State Hospital (in Concord) for three years," Betty says, her voice rising in emphasis. "And that's when they were starting to close the institutions," she added, referring to the landmark 1981 court decision that led to the closing of Laconia State School.

"They couldn't tell us we didn't need housing."

A decade later, thanks to the efforts of many people just like Betty, New Hampshire became the first state in the nation to adopt community-based programs to serve all of its residents with handicaps and mental illness.

To this day - and probably for many more into the future - Betty occupies a seat on the **Harbor Homes** board of directors. That chair is rarely empty; her contributions haven't waned a bit. If once in awhile her comments lead into a rather detailed homily, sending the sometimes lengthy meetings into an extra inning or two, not a soul around the long stretch of mahogany raises as much as an eyebrow.

"You've got to pay it forward," Betty is known to say. "You can't pay it back."

Memo: Dean Shalhoup's column appears Saturdays in The Telegraph. He can be reached at 594-6523 or dshalhoup@nashuatelegraph.com.

Section: *Dean Shalhoup*

Page: 1

Record Number: 303289931

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