

Pioneer of inclusion in New Brunswick dies

KATRINA CLARKE, THE DAILY GLEANER - January 2, 2019

She was a champion of women, a “pioneer” of New Brunswick’s inclusion model and a “Renaissance woman” in education.

That’s how Elizabeth “Betty” Owens’ friends, former colleagues and loved ones are remembering her.

Owens, a Beaverbook Scholar and former special education teacher who held several high-level positions within New Brunswick’s Department of Education, passed away on Dec. 21 at the Dr. Everett Chalmers Hospital.

She was 83.

Fredericton’s Rod Campbell first met Owens during his days as director of UNB’s New Brunswick Centre for Educational Administration in the 1990s. He remembers her as a “hard-nosed educator” who suffered no fools.

“She didn’t pull any punches, especially dealing with men,” Campbell said with a laugh. “She’d tell them exactly what she thought and she’d explain to them why they were wrong.”

He said she was a great champion of women, rising in the education ranks herself at a time when women were often overlooked for promotions simply because of their gender.

“She really was trying to lift women up to understand the potential that they had,” Campbell said. “She fought for women all her life.”

Owens was also a strong advocate for students with special needs and fought for their integration into mainstream classrooms, said Anne Marie McGrath, a former superintendent of schools in the Saint John area and Owens’ friend.

“She’d seen the early stages of special needs [education] where children who had learning difficulties very often ended up in the basement behind the furnace room making shell jewelry,” said McGrath. “She knew children had greater potential than that.”

McGrath called her late friend a “Renaissance woman” for her work in leading the charge on inclusion in New Brunswick.

In her role as director of special education for Anglophone schools with the Department of Education, Owens hired education experts Claire Correia and Léonard Goguen to review the existing Auxiliary Classes Act – legislation which dealt with the education of special needs students. In their report, the experts recommended scrapping the act, bringing special needs students into mainstream classrooms – if that was where they could best thrive – and amending the Schools Act to include education for special needs students.

In 1986, the New Brunswick legislature passed Bill 85, amending the Schools Act and repealing the Auxiliary Classes Act. It marked the province's first true step toward the inclusion model that exists today.

Owens was largely responsible for that, Correia said.

"She was a pioneer really in special education," Correia said, speaking to the Daily Gleaner.

Correia remembers her late friend as someone who was empathetic, kind and strong willed. She was not afraid to speak her mind, Correia said.

"If you weren't doing for children what you should be doing – she could come down hard on you," she said.

Owens was born into a family of eight children in Saint John in 1935. She was the youngest child and, as such, "spoiled rotten," joked her brother Jim Owens, the only surviving sibling.

Her brother remembers Owens as someone who was outgoing and organized, even as a child.

"She was all for education and all I wanted to do was get out of school and go to work," said Jim Owens.

Owens said his sister never married and didn't have children. She was close with her nieces and nephews and had many friends with whom she'd spend time in Florida in her retirement, he said.

Campbell, who became good friends with Owens in her retirement, recalled their memorable dinner parties in Fredericton. Owens was a "fabulous cook" who would whip up a delicious prime rib roast or beef tenderloin for her friends and always had their drink of choice at the ready, he said.

He'd try to extend the same hospitality to her.

"When Betty was coming here for dinner I made sure I had gin and vermouth so I could make her her favourite drink," Campbell said. "She loved martinis."

He said Owens never lost her passion for fighting for what she believed in.

Case in point: when visiting her in hospital leading up to the September provincial election, Owens told Campbell she'd learned a woman in nearby hospital bed was having trouble securing a ballot so she could vote.

"She called my wife Pam about four times [about this]," Campbell said with a laugh. "They went back and forth. And they got a ballot to that woman."

A memorial mass for Owens will be held at St. Dunstan's Catholic Church in Fredericton on Friday, Jan. 11 at 2 p.m. An interment will take place in Holy Cross Cemetery at a later date. Her family is asking for donations in Owens' memory to be made to the charity of the donor's choice.