

A Tribute to Jane Wilhelm

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Reston lost one of its true pioneers and most effective advocates when Jane Wilhelm passed away recently. She was formally involved in establishing much of the community organization that is Reston. She helped to make Reston the inclusive community that it is.

She was also an important transitional figure in her native state of Virginia. Born in the far southwestern tip of the state in the town of Norton to a family involved in the local politics of the area, Jane's interest in politics and public policy developed early. But Virginia in 1914 when she was born and in 1936 when she graduated from the College of William and Mary was a very different place than she wanted it to be.

Personally acquainted with the late Sen. Harry F. Byrd whose machine dominated Virginia and kept the state racially segregated, Jane fought for a more open Democratic Party and state government and for racial integration of the public schools. She openly and forcefully opposed the Byrd machine's efforts to keep schools segregated through massive resistance. For me, Jane was a conscience reminding me of what I needed to do in office. As a former school teacher, she wanted the schools in Reston to be the very best. And she wanted all schools to be the very best including the ones in the poorer regions of southwest Virginia. She reminded me that while I was elected to represent Reston in the House of Delegates I became part of a larger body whose responsibility it was to represent all the people of the entire state.

Several years ago, she gave me a framed copy of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom authored by Thomas Jefferson. It remains a prized possession of mine and a reminder from Jane of the inclusiveness that our society must demonstrate.

I will always remember Jane's appearances at my annual public hearings where in recent years she attended assisted by her wheeled walker. Her insights were always keen. She always spoke the truth whether or not it was politically popular. Jane always had practical suggestions for moving the state forward.

Reston is a better place to live because of Jane Wilhelm, as is the Commonwealth of Virginia. I hope to always remember the things she told me; I think she helped me be a better legislator.