

## Remembering Brenda

*Family mattered most ... her two brothers, her eight nieces and nephews ... her RHA family, so many like Nancy Manary living lives of dignity, respect and acceptance because Brenda gave them home and family.*



She wanted one more trip to New York City ... one more meal at the Pine Club ... one more UD Flyers basketball game ... one more time to meet with colleagues and friends and make a board meeting run a little long so she could tell just one more story. She maintained her sense of humor and her dignity through years of chemotherapy, radiation, experimental treatments, remissions and relapses before cancer finally took Brenda Whitney from us in October. She was 75-years-young.

Brenda completed nursing school at the Miami Valley School of Nursing in the 1960s. After working as a R.N. for several years, she attended Wright State University and earned her degree in social work. Changing careers, she became the Executive Director of the Resident Home Association in 1971, a position she 'owned' until her retirement in 2008. Immediately following her retirement, she accepted a position to serve on the Joint Development Committee of Partners For Community Living, the fundraising and advocacy collaborative she founded in partnership with Tom Weaver (*Choices In Community Living*) in 2002.

She was instrumental in the founding of the statewide lobbying organization, the Ohio Provider Resource Association (*OPRA*), where she served as president in the 1980s. She was a leader, along with families, in the closing of state institutions and the re-integration of people with developmental disabilities into their communities. She and Tom Weaver provided leadership and support in the statewide effort to record the history of people who lived in institutions through the ***Lest We Forget*** documentaries and book, which have been distributed nationally and internationally to universities, social service organizations and more.

*(Continued)*

She was recognized over the years with a statewide Lifetime Achievement Award, the Mary O'Leary Lifetime Achievement Award, Erin Ritchey Memorial Award, and John W. Pratt Legacy Award.

She was a world traveler, always accompanied by her life partner William Vaughn, known to all as Boots. She held on to life as long as she could because most of all she did not want to leave him alone. She had some harrowing experiences on a trip to Russia, enough to make the always fearless Brenda proclaim she would not go back. There were those annual trips to New York and to the ocean, always with adventures, like fleeing hurricanes, that became part of the stories she would tell.

It would be hard to find anyone who packed as much living in 75 years as Brenda did. It would be impossible to find anyone who gave more of herself to others than Brenda did. She walked with people out of the darkness of institutions. She was the guiding force behind the development of so many agencies across Ohio that, like her beloved RHA, were value-based, focused on quality, community-based services. She built enduring partnerships and friendships with families, professionals and communities. Most of all, she built homes and formed families for her residents. She walked with them as they found homes, jobs, friends, families. She was with them throughout their lives .... with so many of them as their lives ended .... celebrating their lives as she grieved their deaths .... as it has now come time for us to celebrate her life even as we grieve her death.

*Following the briefest of retirements from the Montgomery County Board of Developmental Disabilities, Judy Leasure was lured to a luncheon by Brenda Whitney, with the expectation of catching up with the latest news and comings and goings. What she found instead was Brenda's smiling face, accompanied by a somewhat insistent twist of the arm to leave retirement behind and take on a new adventure. That new adventure would become Partners For Community Living. Eighteen years after that arm twisting, Partners continues its support for Resident Home and Choices In Community Living. Judy has once again retired (almost) and Brenda is gone, try as she might with that final arm twist with cancer to hold on to the life she loved just a little longer. She wasn't ready to go just yet, just as we are not yet ready to let her go. **And so, we remember Brenda.***



The Brenda I knew over the years had many facets to her: the forever smiling Brenda; the sly but humorous Brenda; the pioneer for community services; the person who didn't hold grudges, the collaborator; 'big city' Brenda; and the compassionate Brenda. There were certainly more sides, but these stand out to me.

I met her early in my career. We remained friends throughout my time in Dayton and beyond. One characteristic that stood out the most was the combination of her leadership with Resident Home and her willingness to work with others, notably with Choices In Community Living, that led to the founding of Partners For Community Living. She adapted to the times and continued to lead. She recognized that working together was better than being in competition. Mostly, she cared about the people entrusted to her care.

I liked the Brenda who would come to New York City for visits where we would get together. She and Boots would come to the City with Paul and Judy Leasure and together we enjoyed so many experiences – the restaurants (even though they were expensive, to say the least), the Broadway plays, sitting outside in a restaurant patio into the late hours of the night talking, sharing memories of how things used to be, of people we had known, of all the challenges we had faced and all the accomplishments we had celebrated, sitting there filled with our wonderful memories as the world walked by. Most of all, I will remember Brenda for the kind person that she was.

*Kenneth Ritchey served as Superintendent of the Montgomery County Board of Developmental Disabilities Services and later as Director of the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, before retiring and moving to the East Coast.*



I remember my first time meeting Brenda. It was at the National ARC Conference in Indianapolis in 1976. I was introduced to her by two leaders from Urbana, Ohio – Rosemary Todd and Martha Neer. Both were state ARC board members. From that point on, Brenda was my 'expert' for residential services.

When I returned to CRSI in Urbana after a six-year span with the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, Brenda encouraged me to join OPRA. She was a true leader in our field and led OPRA, regardless of whether she was the president or not. She was a stalwart in the legislative and rule making aspect of state government. The word 'sage' should always be used when discussing Brenda and her contributions to the field of disabilities.

*As long-time president and CEO of one of Ohio's largest private residential providers, Champaign Residential Services, Inc. (CRSI), Than Johnson worked with Brenda throughout decades of societal and systemic changes in services for people with developmental disabilities.*

I first met Brenda Whitney in the late 1970s during an OPRA (*Ohio Provider Resource Association*) meeting. Over time I came to know her as a mentor, a leader and a source of inspiration and support in the developmental disabilities field. Most importantly, she became my colleague and good friend. Along with consumers, families and professionals from both the private and governmental sector, I include myself as one who benefitted greatly from her work and her vision in opening doors and providing opportunities for people with DD.

I was proud to serve as VP when Brenda was the president of OPRA in its formative years. I only wish we had a candidate like Brenda for our national president today. It's difficult to put over 40 years of personal and professional friendship into a few words. She was a major influencer on my career in the field of DD. My beloved friend Brenda Whitney made a great and lasting impact on so many lives. She will be missed by all.

*Bob Archer journeyed with Brenda in the development of community-based residential services, serving as the long-time Executive Director of Toward Independence. The two agencies frequently collaborated on events and activities, while Bob and Brenda fearlessly lobbied and advocated for funding and legislation.*



I know why Brenda touched so many hearts and created such a wonderful legacy. It's because she cared deeply, because she spent her life, personal and professional, helping others. She was a leader, a visionary and an advocate all wrapped up into one fiery ball of energy! Yet when I think of Brenda, the first thing that comes to mind is her smile – big – welcoming – full of joy. In so many ways she always seemed larger than life itself!

Whenever we would meet she would walk into the room with that big smile and infectious joy and there was no doubt Brenda was in the room. "Hi, Tommy (*she always called me Tommy*)," she would greet me and I would immediately feel at ease. From the moment I met her I was drawn in by her charisma and strength.

She had the respect of so many, both in the world of I/DD and in our Dayton community. She had this really huge heart for those who could not care or stand for themselves, which was evidenced by her caring and hard work that assured RHA would become the agency that would be known statewide for its quality services and depth of caring for residents and families. It was her leadership that created statewide standards of quality care. She was wonderful in so many ways. I miss her greatly!

*Tom Weaver is Executive Director of Choices In Community Living. In 2002 he and Brenda founded **Partners For Community Living** with a belief that two agencies who shared the same values and mission could and would be stronger together. They shared a passion for collaboration and partnership that has led to national, state and regional achievements, including the **Lest We Forget** documentaries and book, annual statewide Art & Soul juried art exhibit and more.*

Brenda was a founding member of the Ohio Provider Resource Association (OPRA.) I think it's safe to say that if not for her efforts, there would be no OPRA. She saw the benefit of collaboration between competitors, knowing that by joining as one force, the group could realize systemic change that would benefit both providers and the people they served. She spent countless hours volunteering for the betterment of the field. She did so happily and with a sense of purpose. She was instrumental in getting her colleagues to focus on what really mattered and in elevating issues to state lawmakers and administration officials when necessary.

Brenda continued to support OPRA after her retirement by volunteering at our annual golf outing in Urbana. She was our returning 'celebrity host.' Everyone was always so happy to see her. We will miss her dedication, commitment and humor. She was a trailblazer, innovator and friend.

*Anita Allen is Vice-President of the Ohio Provider Resource Association, with more than 30 years of experience in residential and adult day support services.*



I first met Brenda when I joined the Resident Home Association board in the 1990s. I had been on boards of several nonprofit organizations, but RHA quickly stood out as an organization with a great mission and a culture of excellent execution. It also quickly became clear that the driving force behind it all was Brenda.

She was educated and trained as a nurse. I'm married to a nurse and have several nurse friends. Brenda was unlike any nurse I had ever met. She had a gift for administration in all its forms, and most certainly in personal interactions. She was a tremendous advocate for people with developmental disabilities and for RHA. I originally thought that was true only locally, but quickly learned her influence extended statewide and even beyond Ohio. Her impact in many areas will continue to be felt for many years.

Brenda was there with RHA almost from the beginning. The RHA and other similar organizations that we may take for granted today were a new concept when she began. She helped establish the organization on firm footing, leading during a period of growth in services, personnel and finances. The RHA you see today is in large part the legacy left to us by Brenda Whitney.

*Gary Newton is the president of the RHA Board of Trustees and a member of the Joint Development Committee of Partners For Community Living.*





*Brenda's happiest moments were spent with friends like Vivienne Himmell. To those in her circle of friends, she was honest, direct, sometimes blunt and always fiercely loyal, always there in times of need and times of joy. Her lifetime friendships with Vivienne, John Pratt and his family, Ellen McCloskey and so many more were filled with adventures and misadventures, challenges and changes, laughter and pure joy.*

When Wright State University was beginning to make a name for itself as a haven for non-traditional students to complete their much longed for education, three 'non-traditional students' would come together to form friendships that would last for nearly 50 years. They would join each other following graduation in long careers dedicated to people with developmental disabilities. Those three women were Vivienne Himmell, Marlene Carne and Brenda Whitney.

While Vivienne and Marlene would put their social work education to work at the Montgomery County Board of Developmental Disabilities (*what was then the Montgomery County Board of Mental Retardation*), Brenda would follow her calling at a small nonprofit that provided homes in the community for people whose families could not provide them care, a place called the Resident Home Association of Greater Dayton. Beginning with one home in east Dayton, she built an organization that now has eight homes and that provides services in five other homes that are owned by MVIO (*Miami Valley In-Ovations*.)

Her commitment was not confined to local issues. She became a leader in the field, served on numerous boards across Ohio. She lobbied legislators to provide funding and to assure their commitment to the people she cherished. Throughout Ohio and in other states, organizations looked to her success as pathways to their own successes. We are forever grateful for her commitment and vision.

*Vivienne Himmell hadn't even settled into a 'retirement' schedule, when her good friend Brenda did a little arm twisting that resulted in Vivienne volunteering to serve as a long-time member of the RHA Board of Trustees. With just another small tug, Brenda even convinced her to become a member of the Joint Development Committee for Partners For Community Living. They also both enjoyed working together on efforts for the League of Women Voters. This time it was Vivienne who did the little arm twist to get Brenda involved.*



My memories of Brenda from long ago are probably much more favorable than her memories of me from that time. She was about ten years older than me. I met her as she hung out with my mom (*Betty Gmeiner, one of the founding families of RHA.*) She seemed amused by my teenage antics at the time. I imagine they weren't that far removed from some of her own teenage antics. Later on at RHA Board meetings where I was serving, she would refer to me as Tommy. I know she was remembering some of those teen antics and was enjoying letting me know she remembered them.

I remember her as a devoted executive director. I fondly remember that she was a very good friend to my mom and to Marge Bristow. The three of them were quite the unlikely trio, but they seemed to really enjoy each other, both at the personal and professional level.

Brenda knew how to light up a room with a big smile. Her affection for our residents was so warm and so obvious. I loved to watch them interact. When I was a kid in Catholic school, teachers would talk about having a vocation or a calling. That word isn't used that much today, but if ever someone had a calling, it was Brenda. Her advocacy, enthusiasm, passion and love provided the greatest light to the people we serve. Her legacy is the Resident Home Association. It would not be what it is today without her.

*Tom Gmeiner is currently serving as a member of the RHA Board of Trustees, a position he has held in the past. His service follows the lead of his parents, Ed and Betty Gmeiner, who, along with Brenda, were pioneers in a civil rights movement for people with developmental disabilities.*



I worked with Brenda for one summer in 1973, primarily doing some file organization for RHA. I knew her through the years, through the fundraisers my mom and her worked on together. Those were the days before we had state funding and there was always a need to fundraise.

I remember her as a very vibrant person, with an infectious, joyful spirit that infused her work and all she did. I really enjoyed her. Although I have not seen her in years, I still have strong memories of her contributions to the Resident Home Association.

*Kathleen Gmeiner (sister of Tom Gmeiner) is testimony to the sense of family Brenda instilled at RHA. She and her brother are 2<sup>nd</sup> generation advocates and voices for people with developmental disabilities, following in the pioneering work of their parents, as so many have, like the daughters of John Pratt and others.*

I first met Brenda in the late 70s when I was working for the Council for Retarded Citizens as the JOY coordinator. I felt an instant connection with her. She lit up the room with her engaging and positive personality. She had a way of making people feel special.

I idolized her. She became a big sister to me and immersed herself in my life. She went with me to my mom's house for dinner. She threw me a bridal shower. She came to my wedding, accompanied by residents of four of her homes. She was there for my daughter's wedding and, most recently, for my husband's celebration of life. She attended the funerals of my parents and numerous relatives. She would see an obituary in the paper. I would get to the church and there would be Brenda, always there to support me.

She had met my brother Henry, who was famous for his fish fries in the Polish community in north Dayton. Brenda, never one to allow an introduction to get away without turning it into a resource, talked her way into Henry's heart and thus the famous RHA fish fries began.

She encouraged and supported me throughout my career in the disabilities field. We would talk for hours! She was the best storyteller. How lucky am I to have called her my friend!

*Alice Pavey is the Superintendent of the Hamilton County Board of Developmental Disabilities Services. She and Brenda worked on numerous efforts during the time Alice was with the Montgomery County Board of Developmental Disabilities Services and after, always building bridges for the benefit of her residents and for all those with developmental disabilities.*



### *1945 – 2020 The Dash Between*

We ponder these two dates and how little they both mean when compared to the tiny dash that lies there in between.

The dash is an emblem of her time here on earth although small, it stands for her years of life and worth.

She looked for opportunities to do a worthy deed and reached out with compassion to those who were in need.

For her heart was full of love throughout her journey here loved by all who knew her, her memory held so dear.

And now her memory brings grateful, loving tears to all those whose lives she touched by the dash between her years.