

IN MEMORIAM  
ELIZABETH MAY GEFFEN



*E*LIZABETH MAY GEFFEN, 89, former president, vice-president, and councilor of the Pennsylvania Historical Association and professor emeritus of history at Lebanon Valley College, died peacefully in her sleep after a long illness in Cornwall, PA, on September 8, 2002. Dr. Geffen earned her S.S. in English Education, M.A. in English, and Ph.D. in American Civilization all from the University of Pennsylvania. She regarded her doctorate as a badge of honor for having earned the degree as a part-time student while working full-time. Prior to coming to Lebanon Valley, she worked as an editorial assistant for *Vogue* magazine and then as administrative assistant to several presidents of the University of Pennsylvania including Harold E. Stassen.

She arrived on the campus of Lebanon Valley in August of 1958 and retired in June of 1983. During this long tenure she worked her way through the academic ranks and retired as professor of history and chair of the department of history and

political science. She said many times that she had two careers one as an accomplished historian and another as a college history teacher. She excelled at both.

Her book, *Philadelphia Unitarianism 1796-1861*, was widely respected. She also wrote a number of articles for professional historical publications. At Lebanon Valley, she was the first member of her department to receive an external research grant. At a time when Lebanon Valley was one of the best kept secrets in Pennsylvania, many in the historical profession knew of the college only through Betty and consequently thought well of the college because they thought well of her.

As a college history teacher, her major goal was to motivate students to study American history. She was well respected by her students, especially by the majors who regarded her as "knowing her stuff." She was a fair mentor and loved students who tried hard. She was most appreciated by alumni who kept in touch with her and she was proud of her successes. Majors who went on to graduate school found themselves especially well prepared. To them she made a difference. She taught by telling stories and her anecdotal lectures showed her jolly sense of humor. She was old school in the sense of being tough and rigorous. She often challenged students to work harder than what they thought was their level of ability. In the classroom she used her eyes effectively, often rolling them as signs of student mediocrity. Dr. Geffen was respected by her faculty associates. She did not speak often at faculty meetings, but when she did her colleagues listened.

Dr. Geffen developed a reputation as a social liberal. She deplored bigotry and prejudice. In the 1960's a reporter asked her if she were a feminist and she replied, "while I am a champion of women, I don't have enough time to be a feminist leader." She was a registered Democrat, but never used the lectern as a bully pulpit nor did she have time to be involved in party politics. Betty was loyal to her friends, reserved but gregarious, and compassionate. An associate once observed that "Betty would give people the shirt off her back, but don't make the mistake of helping her take it off."

She was a family oriented person and in fact had two families: her students and the four sons of her sister and their families. Someone once said, "If she had married she would have been like Abigail Adams" whom she greatly admired.

Dr. Geffen was a life-long learner, taking classes in French and Spanish at Lebanon Valley for many years and became known as a frequent flyer because of her trips around the world, traveling well into her eighties.

Her financial generosity included gifts for the establishment of a student scholarship at Lebanon Valley and the Audubon Society. Both organizations are receiving donations in her memory. Her legacy is the many hundreds of students whose lives were enriched by her teaching and mentoring. She was an awesome person, tough but o' so gentle.

HOWARD L. APPLGATE,

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