

Ithaca loses a mainstay

Ruth Pettengill, the force behind many of the area's human services, is leaving town

By Margaret Claiborne. Ithaca Journal – July 22, 1993

Family & Children's Service of Ithaca, the Human Service Coalition, Homes Inc. – all owe their existence to Ruth Pettengill- though she'd deny it.

“Don't think I started Homes; I was just the chairman of the committee that started it,” she says.

But colleagues say Pettengill knows how to inspire people - how to make things happen.

That ability comes, the longtime Ithacan speculates, “from being on my own from the time I left Ithaca for college, and from just natural meanness.” Her blue eyes twinkle behind her glasses as she says this.

Wednesday afternoon, friends of Pettengill-from the Health planning Council, Family & Children Service, the Human Service Coalition Board and Review Committee and Homes Inc.- honored her at a farewell reception.

The reason: Pettengill, who came with her parents to Ithaca when she was a year old, is leaving town. She is going to live in a Quaker Retirement community near Philadelphia.

Pettengill was honored Wednesday for her “significant contributions to the human service community.” Her work has, indeed, been considerable.

She presided over the consolidation of The Family Society and Children's Home, and serves as executive director of the resulting Family & Children Service from 1957 until 1972. During that time, she guided the agency's counseling, adoption and drug prevention services, and saw a special worker position established in the public school system.

She is also credited by co-workers with playing major roles in establishing and administering:

- the Homemakers Service;
- the Tompkins County Day Care Council;
- the Legal Aid Society;
- the Planned Parenthood Board;
- Parents Without Partners

Just how is it she's accomplished so much? June Rogers, who worked with her to establish a day-care center, described the Pettengill style in 1972; “We will all be discussing something at a meeting while she is silent. Then, in the middle, she will clearly summarize something. She brings things together and somehow things happen. She is never pushy,” Rogers says.

Pettengill laughs at that characterization.

“I don’t like verbiage,” she says. “I listen for a while and then say, ‘What you are saying is...’ and we go from there. Call it aggressive if you want to - but I do listen first.” The slender, silver-haired lady crosses one leg over the other in a manner that indicates that she’s completely in charge and comfortable being so.

Pettengill began her career in social work in New York City in the early ‘30s, during the Great Depression. Her first job, at 23, was to train a group of upper class Southern woman to be social workers.

“Those women didn’t know a thing about poverty,” she laughs. “We worked in New Rochelle in a community of service people. Those women would come out bug-eyed!”

The problem, she says, was seeing what they considered immortality- an unmarried mother, for instance. “I had to teach them people can be respected even if their way of life and morals aren’t the same as ours.”

That was quite a challenge, since Pettengill was much younger than many of the women she was teaching.

“But I had a lot of security” she says. “It stems not only from being the oldest of seven children, but from living in Ithaca, which was small enough for me to grow up knowing who I was.”

Then she was Ruth Robinson, daughter and granddaughter of Ithaca lawyers, used to the idea she was supposed to grow up an independent person.

“I left home for college and didn’t come back for 25 years,” she says.

While she was working in New York, she met and married Jason Pettengill. The Pettengills spent some time in California, came back east when Jason took a job as director of a children’s home in Islip, Long Island, then finally moved, in 1951, to Sheldrake on the west side of Cayuga Lake.

“We converted a summer home we had there into a year-round home. It was wonderful,” she says.

The Pettengills started their family – two boys and a girl - when they returned from California. Ruth continued as a social worker until her daughter was born.

When the Pettengills moved back to the Ithaca area, Ruth went back to the Columbia School of Social Work and updated her credentials. It was then she signed on as a social worker with the Family Society.

Since her husband died in 1970, Pettengill has lived by herself.

“It took me two years to accept that I didn’t have someone to talk to when I got home. But I am independent,” she says, “I like people, but I like my solitude.”

What she’ll miss most about Ithaca is the diversity of people. And it’s a very caring place, she says. For the future, she only hopes the service agencies will keep the lines of communication open through the Human Service Coalition, which helps coordinate and plan human services in the community.

“No need for people to duplicate services or reinvent the wheel,” she says.