

At a Meeting of the  
Faculty of Vassar College  
held  
May sixth, nineteen hundred  
eighty-one, the following  
Memorial  
was unanimously adopted:

Helen Miringoff spent thirty years of her life deeply immersed in the field work program of Vassar College. She was, as the Poughkeepsie Journal commented at the time of her death, a vibrant and vital link between the college and the community. She loved them both and she worked tirelessly to help them understand and relate to each other. Vassar has a long tradition of field study and community involvement dating back to the 19th Century. In the past thirty years that tradition has been maintained and strengthened largely through the work of Helen Miringoff.

Helen was born in Brooklyn on February 2, 1916, the daughter of Samuel and Yetta Frohlich. She grew up in Brooklyn and attended Corlears Business College and Brooklyn College but could not afford to continue to a degree at that time. She earned her B.A. from Bard College in 1975. Helen worked for 10 years as a secretary and office manager at Isbet Electric Manufacturing Company in New York City and from 1944 to 1946 was with the American Red Cross at the U.S. Army Hospital in Martinsburg, W. Va. before coming to work as a secretary in the Public Relations Office at Vassar in 1949 when her elder son started in the Vassar Nursery School. After a brief interruption of employment during the infancy of her younger son, she returned to Vassar in 1954. She served in the Field Work Office from then until her death on March 22, 1981.

Helen grew up in a family which believed you have to do for yourself but you also have to do for the community. She exhibited to the community the caring concerns with which she was raised and which she continued to practice until her death as a member of numerous boards of directors of a great number of community agencies. Among the organizations to which she gave her committed, selfless service were Adelphi/Hudson Valley Program, Community Action Agency, Dutchess County Arts Council, Dutchess County Social Workers Club, Neighborhood Services Organization, Poughkeepsie Executives' Club, the Poughkeepsie Family Development and Day Care Center, the Jewish Community Center and the Vassar Summer Program for Disadvantaged Children of the Poughkeepsie Area.

In 1954, Helen was a secretary but clearly no ordinary one. Her drive and energy, her wide-ranging curiosity and compassion, and her shrewd sense of where to turn in

the community set her apart. Her enormous respect for Eleanor Roosevelt and for Eleanor's sense that democracy and justice must be built at the local level also impressed anyone who knew her.

When the first director of Vassar's Field Work Office, Clarice Pennock, retired, and a successor left, Helen ran the office. She ran it exceptionally well, not only administering it efficiently but also reaching out to develop new contacts in the community. The then Dean of the Faculty, Charles Griffin, had decided after careful consideration that the secretary should become the Assistant and Acting Director. He recognized that no superior credentials from outside the community were as valuable to the college as the quite extraordinary ability of Helen Miringoff to persuade Vassar students and faculty and residents of Poughkeepsie that they could learn much from each other. That decision by Charles Griffin and Helen's elevation to Director in 1970 were among the college's finer moments.

Helen believed passionately in action informed by knowledge and commitment. Field work gave her one opportunity to put that belief into practice and to spread it around. She did so with enormous enthusiasm and energy. To faculty -- often inclined to knowledge for its own sake -- she talked always of the need for action and involvement. To students -- sometimes eager for involvement but impatient with study -- she counseled the importance of knowledge.

Helen knew better than most of us that changing anyone's perspective requires skill and patience. She did not expect easy results; she knew how long it takes to get your mind out of old ruts and think something through in a fresh way. Her salty tongue helped here. She could draw you up short with a sharp characterization or a sarcastic question which exposed whatever shallow or wishful thinking you had been engaging in. But you didn't feel that she had diminished you or reduced the subject. You knew she cared.

She saw clearly the needs of her pupils as individuals. Field work has not been -- and is not now -- regarded highly by all members of the Vassar faculty. Helen worked ceaselessly to expand field work opportunities. She taught the faculty about field work. With some, she patiently and subtly suggested often over several years; with others, she served as facilitator bringing them into contact with agency heads or businessmen to generate a common interest in educational opportunities for Vassar students; with still others, she needed, cajoled and prodded. She used the same techniques of persuasion, prodding and education on agency heads and others in the community in her unstinting efforts to enlist them in contributing to the education of Vassar students.

Her effectiveness is measured in the growth of field work at Vassar -- not just in numbers of students but in the range

of subjects in which it is available and in the numbers of faculty involved. She always took special pleasure in involving more and more faculty in the program. She reached across generations of faculty members and brought the younger and older together in common endeavors. She welcomed new faculty in the most open of ways and never ignored the old friends she had made.

Helen's many-sided participation in the life of Poughkeepsie helped all of her students -- undergraduates, faculty and townspeople alike -- to see connections between classroom and community more clearly. But she resisted any tendency to view the connections as primarily practical or convenient. You could always count on Helen to raise questions about how much could be learned from particular field work assignments and to urge dropping those with too little intellectual challenge. Benefits for community programs or for students' career planning remained secondary to the primary purpose of developing students' critical powers and imagination, even in smaller activities.

Nothing so well exemplified Helen's understanding of the proper marriage between the life of the mind and our particular circumstances and traditions as her life-long devotion -- shared with her beloved husband, Hy -- to perpetuating the study of Yiddish. Those happy few who enjoyed the good company, food and conversation in her house off Hooker Avenue know what excitement and pleasure she brought to their exploration of Yiddish. She was proud of the culture which Jews had created in Europe and the United States, and its dual appreciation of learning and of community. She exemplified both values in her own life and in her direction of the Office of Field Work.

Respectfully submitted,

*M. Glen Johnson*  
M. Glen Johnson, Chairman

*Clyde Griffen*  
Clyde Griffen

*Elsie McLaughlin*  
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