

KATHRYN WASSERMAN DAVIS

1907 - 2013



Renowned philanthropist, Kathryn Wasserman Davis, passed away peacefully at her Florida residence on April 23, 2013, at the age of 106. A resident of Tarrytown for 70 years, Mrs. Davis was a passionate advocate for peace and a champion of preservation along her beloved Hudson River.

Born in 1907, the youngest child of Joseph Wasserman, and Edith Stix, she led an exciting life, travelling to Europe, the Middle East and Asia at a very young age. Her father, an innovative carpet manufacturer, founder of Art Loom in Philadelphia, collected art and antiques throughout the world, eventually donating a Chinese Buddhist temple to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. As a little girl, Kathryn marched with her mother in suffragette parades. Graduating from Wellesley College in 1928, she received her M.A. in international affairs at Columbia University in 1931. While living at International House, she watched the George Washington Bridge being built - thus beginning her undiminished love affair with the Hudson River.

She earned her Ph.D. in political science from the University of Geneva in 1934, writing a published thesis entitled "The Soviets at Geneva: The USSR and the League of Nations, 1919-1933" - a timely study of the forerunner to the United Nations. In Geneva, she met fellow student and future husband, Shelby Cullom Davis, whom she married in 1932, and who was as interested in Russia as she. She visited that country over 30 times, frequently meeting Russian leadership and celebrating her 95th birthday with Mikhail Gorbachev. Her love affair with Russia began in 1929, when she and her sister took a horseback riding trip through the Caucasus Mountains, a daring and adventure-filled exploit that changed her life. When her horses were stolen, Kathryn recalled, "We ate wild berries for breakfast and spit-roasted mountain goat for dinner, and I couldn't have been happier."

Mrs. Davis joined her husband in helping create the family firm specializing in insurance securities in addition to their family foundation through which they supported educational initiatives at their alma maters and other institutions. A trustee at Wellesley College, she created Russian Studies and Economics chairs, enhanced Asian and Slavic studies, supported student financial aid and created the college's Davis Museum and Cultural Center. At her husband's alma mater, Princeton, the Davis's created the Davis Center for Historical Studies, multiple history professorships, and The Davis International Center. In addition, she has funded the Kathryn and Shelby Collum Davis Libraries at St. John's University and her newest, at Geneva's Graduate Institute of International and Developmental Studies. She received honorary doctorates from Columbia University and Middlebury College, and relished her role as the wife of the United States Ambassador to Switzerland from 1969-75.

In 2007, Mrs. Davis received the Woodrow Wilson Award for Public Service at a ceremony in Washington D.C. where she joined notable scholars and world leaders, all recipients of this august award. In 2006, she was awarded the East-West Institute's Peace and Conflict Prevention Prize bestowed on her for her generous and life-long commitment to peace.

On turning 100, Mrs. Davis created Projects for Peace with a million dollar challenge grant for 100 students world-wide, each of whom received \$10,000 to design projects that would contribute to creating harmony in unstable regions and thus work toward her cherished goal of making a better world. She continued that challenge ever since, with Projects for Peace going strong into 2013, inspiring and motivating young people through her constant engagement in their initiatives.

Mrs. Davis often reflected on her good fortune to live in Tarrytown, in her home perched high over the Hudson River where the views astounded her every day. Taking up painting in her mid-90's, after she broke her hip playing tennis, she called herself an "impatient impressionist", and took painting classes to age 105, creating hundreds of canvases filled with the views she continually loved.

Partnering with Scenic Hudson, Mrs. Davis gave a substantial bequest to help renovate Sleepy Hollow's deteriorated bathhouse, the Kathryn W. Davis RiverWalk Center, which is now refurbished as a kayak center, educational venue and beautifully restored building enhancing Kingsland Park. In addition, her donation to **Tarryown's Scenic Hudson RiverWalk Park** became the foundation for that park's creation. She also partners with Teatown Lakes Reservation and other local environmental education efforts. An avid tennis player in her youth and competitive in sports, she kayaked on the Hudson River until the age of 105.

Combining her tireless advocacy for international relations with her commitment to local institutions, Mrs. Davis more recently funded the Kathryn W. Davis Fellowship for International Understanding Through Film which makes it possible for filmmakers, educators, and programmers from around the world to live, work, and teach at the Jacob Burns Film Center Campus in Pleasantville. She was an early champion of and lecturer for Planned Parenthood, and more recently funded scientific research on cures for glaucoma. She was presented with the Double Helix Award, given by the Cold Springs Laboratory in recognition of her raising awareness and funds for biomedical research.



Mrs. Davis is survived by her children, Shelby Moore Collum Davis and Diana Spencer Davis, eight grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren. Together with her family legacy, she leaves her friends and community with memories of an indomitable spirit; her life-long curiosity, generosity, wit, warmth and intelligence were unparalleled. Accepting her Woodrow Wilson Award, she commented, " My many years have taught me that there will always be conflict. It's part of human nature. But, I'll remind you that love, kindness and support are also part of human nature. My challenge to you is to bring about a mind-set of preparing for peace instead of preparing for war. We don't know what tomorrow holds. And therefore let us take advantage of today to be as useful as possible."

As diminutive as she was energetic, her unmistakable presence in our river town community, at many cultural events and celebrations, and on the Hudson River in her kayak, will be deeply missed.

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