LEGENDS

FROM THE HILL TO THE ATRIUM

A Tribute to the Men and Women Who Made It Happen

ISSUE 9

Middletown Area Federation of Women’s Clubs
The mid to late 19th century was an exciting time of change, especially for women. As the Progressive era dawned, women across the nation began to organize locally around issues such as suffrage, educational opportunity and public health. As women gained more clout, many women’s organizations joined forces under the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, which became a significant force in society.

Fast-forward to 1920 and zoom in on Middletown, where 16 women’s clubs formed the Middletown Federation of Women’s Clubs. Although originally affiliated with the larger General Federation, the Middletown group broke away in 1953 and eventually became the Middletown Area Federation of Women’s Clubs, including both Trenton and Monroe. The Federation’s purpose in the beginning was to “bring women’s organizations into closer touch with one another for the furtherance of any good cause which may be of common interest.” That mission continues today.
In 1917, just a few years before the Federation was established, Middletown had built a 28-bed hospital. In 1920, still struggling with financial issues, the hospital board asked the Federation’s first president, Sarah Roney, wife of Armco executive J. L. Roney, for member clubs’ help securing equipment, supplies and operational funding. And the Charity Ball was born.

Mrs. C. D. Oglesby chaired the first Charity Ball, which also happened to be the Federation’s first citywide project. The event was held on December 27, 1921, at the Elks Temple. One hundred people paid $1.50 each to enjoy an evening of dancing, entertainment and card playing, netting Middletown Hospital $678.95 to place toward operating expenses. Over the course of 94 years, the Charity Ball has raised more than $1 million to support the needs of hospital patients. Thanks to the Federation’s dedication and hard work, the hospital was able to cover some early operating expenses and has been able to purchase equipment – such as
X-ray machines, operating room and coronary care equipment, and air conditioning – as well as fund programs and construction projects.

In 2010, working with Atrium Medical Center Foundation, the Federation established an Endowment for Women's Health and Wellness to target and strengthen the impact of its annual donation and to ensure its legacy. Now totaling more than $100,000, the endowment supports preventive and diagnostic mammograms, as well as other lifesaving screening procedures, for women who cannot otherwise afford them. In 2014, 24 women benefited from the Federation's support. If a mammogram reveals a possible problem, the endowment also covers additional tests, such as ultrasounds and biopsies.

A ‘Red Carpet’ Event

A beloved institution, the Charity Ball has always been a highlight of the city's holiday season. In the early years, Federation members would gather at the hospital months before the event to hand address invitations. Others made centerpieces, which partygoers could purchase; many kept these works of art displayed at home long after the event.

Charity Ball attendees held cocktail parties and dinners in their homes before the event. Eventually, the annual festivities moved from the Elks Temple to the Manchester Inn. Legend has it that Middletown children
would line the sidewalk in front of the Manchester as if it were a red carpet, just to see the beautiful ladies in their ball gowns, furs and jewels and the handsome men in their tuxedos. In the 1960s and 1970s, entertainment included Big Bands such as Glenn Miller, Count Basie, Woody Herman and Stan Kenton. It’s easy to imagine the Manchester’s glittering dance floor awash in flowing satin and chiffon.

The Federation began a new tradition in 1948 with the selection of a Charity Ball queen and her princess court from among students at Middletown Hospital’s School of Nursing. Soon after, the ball began to feature an annual theme – from “Evening in Paris” in 1951 to “Camelot” in 1969 to “The Emerald City Ball” in 2014, just to name a few. In 1965, the Federation decided to select an outstanding citizen to serve as an honorary chair each year. The list of initial honorees reads like a “who’s who” of old Middletown, with names such as Mrs. Colin Gardner, Mr. and Mrs. William Verity, Mrs. Walter Roehl Sr., Mr. and Mrs. Wilbur Cohen, and Mrs. I.A. Casper.

In 2004, the Federation added dinner to the Charity Ball. Within a couple of years, however, it became clear to older Federation members that the Charity Ball was in jeopardy. Fortunately, younger women stepped up to carry the banner. They continue to infuse the event with new and creative ideas to keep it fun and fresh.
Branching Out

As time-consuming and energy-consuming as the Charity Ball may be, it has not stopped the Federation from enthusiastically pursuing other community-focused projects. In 1948, the Middletown Real Estate Board and local realtor Henry Finkelman initiated the city’s Arbor Day celebration by delivering 3,600 small trees wrapped with planting instructions to all Middletown school children.

Ben Bender, owner of The Central Store on Central Avenue and Verity Parkway in Middletown and his wife, Ruth, eventually assumed financial responsibility for the city’s Arbor Day commemoration. Students began to call the saplings they received “benders.” In 1984, the Bender children turned over management of the family’s “tree trust” to a group composed of Federation past presidents to cover the cost of trees and Arbor Day expenses.

Each year Federation members gather at Saints Constantine & Helen Greek Orthodox Church to prepare Arbor Day trees for distribution to fifth-grade students. In 2014, Federation women (and two husbands) delivered more than 1,300 serviceberry saplings to 15 public and parochial schools in the Middletown area. Since its inception more than 65 years ago, the Arbor Day project has distributed at least 150,000 trees here. Parents and grandparents of today’s fifth-graders remember fondly the spring day they themselves came home with a new tree for the yard.

Investing in tomorrow’s leaders is another major focus for the Federation. For many years,
the group has supported a female student attending Buckeye Girls State at the University of Mount Union in Alliance, Ohio. The weeklong program, which is sponsored by the American Legion Auxiliary of Ohio, is designed to educate the state’s young women in the duties, privileges, rights and responsibilities of good citizenship. The program gives participants an opportunity to live together as self-governing citizens and encourages participation in the democratic process as students progress into adulthood.

Ask any member of the Middletown Area Federation of Women’s Clubs why she supports the Charity Ball, Arbor Day and Buckeye Girls State – just three of the Federation’s many civic and philanthropic projects – and she will be quick to say that all Federation volunteers receive far more than they give. Bringing women’s organizations together to meet shared goals is at once the Federation’s mission and its greatest success.

As the Federation celebrates its 95th anniversary in 2015, countless hospital patients through the years have benefited from the unwavering dedication of these tireless volunteers. With the Federation’s ongoing support, Atrium Medical Center will be able to extend a helping hand to even more women in the years to come.

Our gratitude for helping with this installment of Legends goes to: Neila Barnes, Barbara Brown, Gail Clarey, Marilyn Goughenour, Virginia Jenkins, Mary Maurer, LaVonne Michael, Dorice Perkins and Frances Sack.
This article is the eighth in a series of profiles celebrating the 2017 centennial anniversary of Atrium Medical Center (formerly Middletown Hospital and Middletown Regional Hospital). The series honors the men and women whose civic-mindedness and genuine caring for others helped Greater Middletown grow and contributed to the first-class medical center the region boasts today.

Past Legends focused on:

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