

"Homage to Jean"

Remarks of Frank M. Coffin,
Memorial Service for Jean Byers Sampson
Olin Arts Music Hall
Bates College
December 1, 1996

We three who, with Stephen and Caleb, share this program today feel deeply touched and honored to have been asked by Jean and Dick to speak on this occasion. Each of you could add your own rich store of memories and tributes. Our hope is that we be worthy surrogates for this community of friends of Jean.

We have had one and one half years to prepare for this day -- one and one half years of awareness of our impending separation. Now that this hour has arrived, we confront our expectation and hopes. We are certain about our expectation, that of grieving. We cannot, even if we would, avoid this. It is a necessary self indulgence. We feel sorry for us, for our lives have been diminished.

But our hopes remain. They are that we may offset our loss by keeping memories alive and, through memories, keep Jean with us; that we may draw on the richness and strength of our friend to infuse our own lives; and, perhaps most of all, that we celebrate a life so well lived. Jean would like us to celebrate, although she would not want to be the center of attention. She would want her friends to leave this place not dejected but upbeat. So in that spirit let us proceed.

Our trio shall try to present several portraits. My lens is wide angled as I touch upon the highlights of her public life and the interests of her private life. Shep and Jutka will focus on several close-ups that they can portray with authority.

First, Jean's public life and career. For Jean, though always a homemaker, built a career of singularly effective civic commitment. She was part of the small, determined, valiant first wave of contemporary women to venture into the main stream of public concerns. We could at this point list all of Jean's memberships, leadership positions, and awards. But I think a different tack would be more appropriate.

After Abraham Lincoln retired from Congress, much against his will and with a sense of frustration, he said to his young partner Herndon, "How hard, oh how hard it is to die and leave one's Country no better than if one had never lived for it." Let's take our cue from this thought and revisit Jean's career by trying to imagine if she had never lived.

If Jean Sampson had never lived, her ground-breaking work, "A Study of the Negro in Military Service," researched and written for the NAACP in June, 1947, just after her graduation from Smith, would not have been proudly adopted as "unique" in the field and published by the Department of Defense. I cannot think it mere coincidence that President Truman, in his special message on civil rights, on February 2, 1948, called on the Secretary of Defense to stop discrimination in the military services as soon as possible.

If Jean Sampson had never lived, both the Maine chapter of the NAACP and the celebrated women's glass ceiling breaker, Catalyst, of which she was a co-founder, might have been delayed, diluted, or diverted.

If Jean Sampson had never lived, there simply would not have existed the Lewiston Career Opportunities Program under which disadvantaged men and women were trained for useful careers in public schools.

If Jean Sampson had never lived, she could not have chaired the University of Maine Board of Trustees, leading them unanimously to resist a gubernatorial request that all of them resign to make room for an entire new slate of appointees. Their refusal won national recognition and the rarely bestowed Meikeljohn Award for their contribution to academic freedom.

If Jean Sampson had never lived, she would not have been around in 1978 to do what Shep will tell you she did for the Maine Civil Liberties Union.

If Jean Sampson had never lived, hundreds of troubled couples over the past thirteen years would have been deprived of her calm, wise, and healing service as state court mediator.

And, if I may give a personal testimony, if Jean Sampson had never lived, my gubernatorial campaign in 1960 would not have had her as research director and head of our issues committee, which made a contribution to thinking about state government that long outlasted my own lack of success.

Finally, if Jean had never lived, she could not have shared her brand of quiet wisdom and courage with the Maine League of Women Voters, the State Board of Education, the governing boards of Bowdoin, the American Civil Liberties Union, the national Civil rights commission, the U.S. Office of Education, and the Education Commission of the States.

So if Jean had never lived, who would have missed her? Only the races of man, the poor, the young, all women, gays and lesbians, and those caught up on either the criminal or civil side of our court system.

But Jean Sampson was not merely a public person; she was equally impressive in her private life. She was one of the first of the women of our times to blend gracefully both sides of life. First, what was she like to one who first came in contact with her? Close your eyes. At very little over five feet in height, she was one of the tallest people I have known. Perhaps it was the way she held her head proudly erect. Perhaps it was the way that she looked you straight in the eye and quickly made the playing field level. Her short, uncurly, and oft tousled hair gave her a perennially youthful appearance.

When she smiled, which was often, her entire face would crinkle up with a broad smile that would warm the heart of an Inuit. And she had a way of speaking that made one think of an artist who knows that the spaces around objects are as vital to a painting as the objects; with her, silences were as important as breaking the silence.

If one were privileged to know more about Jean than a first encounter would reveal, he would soon realize that here was a person who loved not just achieving, but living . . . and with Elizabethan zest. She loved travel: Greece, Switzerland, Provence, Tuscany, hiking in Austria, an unforgettable camper-bus summer with the boys in England and on the continent, camping every night, and, a few years ago, a marvelous excursion to Japan, combining touring with a study of Japan's approach to mediation. She loved mountain climbing. She loved reading, especially poetry and letters; wherever she might be, books would cluster around her as if clamoring for her attention.

She loved sailing. Well, not exactly sailing, but trolling for mackerel off the stern. I have seen her pull in three on one line. She loved dancing and singing. On one recent New Year's Eve she ran through a dozen lyrics, with a true, sweet voice and an impeccable memory. I have been authorized to reveal her all time favorite classics. For a love ballad, "My Romance." For virtuosic bel canto, "The Good Ship Lollypop." And for operatic recitative of sheer splendor, "Mairsy Doats." No wonder Stephen and Caleb are so musically gifted.

Finally, and primarily, Jean loved her family. She showed a quiet pride in her remarkable husband, Bates' beloved math professor Dick. He was her best friend. Her pride in her children,

Steve and Caleb, and their spouses Elisa and Kathy, was somewhat noisier. She deeply admired Steve's recent acquisition of a doctorate and Caleb's musical resurrection of film classics. But her pride became truly cacophonous if one gave her the slightest reason to mention Annika or Ian.

That she couldn't quite make it to welcome Caleb and Kathy's Oliver, born this past Tuesday, must have given her anguish. But, knowing Jean, we know that she took the long view and rejoiced that her life continues in ever widening circles.