

Living Tribute

Admirers are working with the YWCA to honor Betty Friedan

Betty Friedan formed the National Organization for Women over lunches with her friends in 1966. Today, Dorothy Sinclair, Diane Brown, Fran Kepler and some of their friends are planning how to honor one of Peoria's most famous daughters over tea, showing again how women can make big change over small conversation.

Friedan, best known for sparking the feminist movement with her 1963 book "The Feminine Mystique," was born and raised in Peoria, and though she moved away during her college years, she often returned to visit friends and worked, unsuccessfully, to help Illinois pass the Equal Rights Amendment.

She died Feb. 4, 2006, her 85th birthday, from congestive heart failure, and her hometown has struggled since to find a fitting tribute — until now.

Better than a statue

"I got to meet Betty Friedan during the ERA struggles and spoke with her at a League of Women Voters meeting. I stood in awe of her," said Kepler. "Here is this woman who was the catalyst for the third wave of feminism in this country. I realized Betty Friedan would not want to be the target of pigeons. That statue idea, that's not going to work for her. That's not the type of living, blood-sweat-and-tears tribute that would befit Betty."

While mulling options, the women reread Friedan's books and a light bulb went off for Kepler.

"At the end of ('The Feminine Mystique') she talks about what she envisions if women were truly allowed to aspire to their full potential. What she talked about was giving support to young mothers because women always have children with them. She talked about day care and career planning and resume writing — all kinds of support. That's when the light bulb went off."

A 'natural' tribute

Kepler and the others, now a committee of 13 area women, realized that the YWCA was already doing those things here, so why not support its success in Friedan's memory?

"It's a marriage of tribute with existing services," said former Planned Parenthood Heart of Illinois President and CEO Joyce Harant.

Adds Hettie Beers, a past president of the League of Women Voters of Greater Peoria: "That's why it's such a natural. We didn't have to create anything new or try to reinvent the wheel."

The Betty Friedan Tribute Committee is working to raise \$100,000 to support the YWCA and rename its child-care center the Betty Friedan Child Care Center. Additionally, the group is establishing a "celebration hall" within the YWCA to honor Friedan and other notable central Illinois women who have "contributed to equality in our culture, furthering the natural alliance between feminism, humanism and family life."

Pam Schubach, CEO of the YWCA Peoria, notes that Celebration Hall — which will be modeled after the Women's National Hall of Fame — will be open to all, not just YWCA members.

"We are in a public park, Lakeview, so that opportunity for the general public (to visit) will always be there," said Schubach, noting that she believes these tributes will act as a springboard to an educational revival of Friedan's work.

Still, the committee knows that significant fundraising is a hurdle, with the community being tapped for many worthy projects — everything from the zoo to the children's museum, riverfront museum, new Family House and Children's Hospital expansion. Until now, they have been reaching out quietly to women and have already raised more than \$10,000.

"I'm very hopeful. I think a lot of women — and men — will want to give even \$10 or \$20," said Diane Brown, program coordinator for the Mental Health Association of Illinois Valley Inc. "She changed a lot of people's lives."

Dorothy Sinclair, the second woman elected to the Peoria City Council in 1975, jokes that



This artistically rendered photograph of pioneering feminist Betty Friedan speaking at the Peoria YWCA during an Equal Rights Amendment rally in the 1970s now hangs in the Peoria County Courthouse.



Peoria native Betty Friedan speaks in this 1974 file photo. The Betty Friedan Tribute Committee is working to raise \$100,000 to support the YWCA and rename its child-care center the Betty Friedan Child Care Center.

she "made the mistake of reading 'The Feminine Mystique,' and I ended up local co-chair of the ERA movement. I worked very hard on that. It was a time of great controversy in Peoria.

"It was certainly a different climate than it is today. If your daughter got into medical school, it was practically worthy of front-page news."

Today, a woman has no problem becoming a doctor or, as we've just seen, running for president or vice president of the United States. Yet, 45 years ago, when Friedan was first published,

the world was a much different place, and her views were controversial.

Sinclair, Kepler, Brown and the others don't want people to forget.

"We need a place where we can come pay homage, where we can take our daughters and our Girl Scout troops," Kepler said. "We can't afford to forget these women. We all stand on their shoulders."

Jennifer Davis can be reached at 686-3249 or jdavis@pjstar.com.

Helping honor Betty Friedan

"Maybe my power and glory was that I could speak my truth as a woman and it was the truth of every woman." — Betty Friedan

Betty Friedan, the mother of modern-day feminism, is one of Peoria's most influential people. Her 1963 book, "The Feminine Mystique," is listed among the most influential works ever written. She is also noted as among the 100 most influential women of all time, placing behind Eleanor Roosevelt but ahead of Joan of Arc.

A committee to create a living tribute to Friedan is working to raise \$100,000 to rename the YWCA child care center the Betty Friedan Child Care Center.

To contribute:

Visit the Web site www.ywcapeoria.org.

Write to:
 Betty Friedan Tribute
 YWCA Peoria
 1013 W. Lake Ave.
 Peoria, IL 61614
 Or telephone:
 685-7655