

Lois Hardt: An Easter Seals Gift



(This article was researched and written by Wayne Corey of Madison, a member of the Easter Seals Wisconsin Board of Directors. Wayne has been an Easter Seals volunteer for 38 years and has served 23 years on the board, serving as chair from 1980-82 and 1990-92.)

Lt. Commander Lois Hardt, Ph.D

“Camp Wawbeek must have touched Lois’ heart. Her heart was with Camp Wawbeek.”

Camp Wawbeek, the historic Easter Seals Wisconsin camp at Wisconsin Dells, has touched thousands of hearts through its 76 year history. Lois Hardt, a camp counselor in Wawbeek’s younger years never forgot Wawbeek. When she passed away in Palm Springs, California in 2012 she left most of her estate to Easter Seals for use at Camp Wawbeek. It was a gift of nearly \$1 million.

The people closest to Lois Hardt agree. “Her heart was with Camp Wawbeek.”

Lois was a Neenah native who spent much of her life leading recreation efforts for people with disabilities and their families. Now, although she is gone from us, her work continues. Like many others who have remembered Easter Seals Wisconsin or Camp Wawbeek in their wills, the good things that Lois did during her lifetime are continuing after her passing. The evidence is at Camp Wawbeek.

“She knew what she wanted and this is what she wanted,” said Joan Blackman, Lois Hardt’s companion for decades. “If she had wanted recognition she would have said something. She just wanted to give (Camp Wawbeek) the money.”

Betty Smith of Appleton is Lois’ sole surviving sibling. “Somewhere along the line something must have happened that really touched her,” Betty says.

Lois was always aware of the challenges faced by the parents and caregivers for people with disabilities. She was especially pleased that a Wawbeek experience provided an opportunity for caregivers to relax and recharge. She would be happy to see today’s highly successful Wisconsin Elks/Easter Seals Respite Camp program conducted on Wawbeek’s 400 acres.

Lois was a supervisor of water sports during her Camp Wawbeek years. Her early academic background was in physical therapy and she saw a natural link between PT and the Wawbeek pool. Lois taught swimming and aquatics at UW-Oshkosh very early in her career. Some of Lois’ Camp Wawbeek gift was directed to construction of our new state-of-the-art pool. Joan Blackman says, “I think Lois would have been happy with that.” Betty Smith, Lois’ sister, agrees.

Lois was an academic. She returned to Neenah High School after her service in World War II. She joined the U.S. Navy Reserve WAVES, ultimately rising to the rank of Lt. Commander. Following her 1946 high school graduation she headed for what is now the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. It was during her years at La Crosse that she spent summers as a counselor at Camp Wawbeek. Her interest in making a career serving people with disabilities was clearly developing.

Lois returned to school in the 1960s, receiving her Ph.D. degree from New York University with a doctoral thesis that showed where her interests had evolved: “An Investigation of Effecting Behavioral Changes through Recreation.” The dissertation dealt with the impact recreation can have on parents and their children with significant cognitive disabilities. Betty Smith says her sister’s inspiration at Wawbeek ultimately led to her Ph.D. and career choices.

Aside from her time studying and teaching at New York University, Lois spent much of the 1960s and all of the 1970s as an executive in camping and recreation at the national office of Easter Seals in Chicago. It was while serving as director of Program & Provider Services at Easter Seals national headquarters that Lois hired a sharp young man named James E. Williams, Jr. Jim Williams ultimately became the president and chief executive officer of Easter Seals, a position he still holds today. He says Lois was supportive of all Easter Seals programs but “her true love was camping and recreation. And she was especially fond of Camp Wawbeek. I think that she saw in camps the opportunity that we have all observed where kids and adults of all abilities could enjoy the freedom, independence, and joy of being with others in a natural setting where limits were not important and the quality of the experience was of the utmost importance.”

That sums up the Camp Wawbeek experience for 76 years!

We don’t know a lot about Lois Hardt; surely not nearly as much as we wish we knew. We know that in retirement she opened Hutten’s Gift Shop in Palm Springs, California where Lois and Joan sold “table-top gifts for the home.” It was “a charming little shop.” We know that Lois loved to travel. Friends describe her as interesting, bright, articulate and opinionated. Lois was a gourmet cook and had a great sense of humor.

She was “a good friend and a nice person,” says Joan Blackman. But even Joan admits that she can’t explain why Lois left most of her estate to Camp Wawbeek. She was “stubborn to the very end but she knew what she wanted and this is what she wanted. I don’t think (leaving her estate to Camp Wawbeek) was a sudden decision because I don’t think Lois made snap decisions. So I’m sure she thought it through.”

“She never wanted a lot of attention. That wasn’t her. But I think she’d be happy about the pool. She told me ‘I’d like to give a rather substantial gift to Camp Wawbeek,’” says Betty.

And so she did. Lois Hardt gave Camp Wawbeek almost \$1 million. She spent her life doing good things and now, in death, she continues to do good things every day for the people who visit Camp Wawbeek and the Easter Seals Center for Camping & Respite.

The Lois Hardt story is a wonderful example of how Easter Seals Wisconsin touches the lives and hearts of people. Lois came to Wawbeek as a counselor at a young age and the experience stayed with her for the remainder of her life. Because of her Wawbeek experiences Lois became a leader in her field. Wawbeek gave to Lois. Lois has given back to Wawbeek. Her story is just one of numerous stories about people whose lives and hearts have been touched and changed by Camp Wawbeek and other Easter Seals programs. Many of those people have given back through generous contributions, planned giving and provisions in their wills. Lois Hardt was grateful for Easter Seals. Easter Seals remains forever grateful for the kind heart and generosity of Lt. Commander Lois Hardt, Ph.D.
