

# Mary Keeley, Woman of the Year 1984

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Mary Keeley, Poughkeepsie-born and raised, was one of a number of local residents who became connected with or inspired by the war against poverty in the 1960s. Her efforts after 1974 focused on an outreach program, incorporated as Dutchess Outreach, Inc. in 1981, that became a continuing source of help for people dealing with "scores of problems-poor housing, sickness, drugs, hunger, family woes, poverty." As Keeley said in 1983, "I do think the poor are under super pressures just to keep living. You can see why [poverty] tears a family apart." Mary Keeley lost her own mother at age ten, but had had supportive "aunts and uncles on all sides."<sup>1</sup>

Her father scrimped to send Mary and her sister to Vassar College. When she graduated in 1941, she had law or the theater in mind. But marriage to Dr. James Keeley, a Poughkeepsie surgeon, and raising four children led her to pursue volunteer activities that over time became a career. Beginning in the 1960s, she served as president of Poughkeepsie's Board of Education and chairman of the city's Human Relations Committee and of the Model City Agency's Education Committee.

In 1974, Trinity United Methodist Church on South Hamilton Street launched a Neighborhood Outreach program, soon renamed the Satellite Citizens Center, with \$5,500 from the Methodist Conference and with Mary Keeley as staff. Like others working with the poor at that time, she saw her role as that of welfare advocate, serving as guide and gateway to the social services her clients needed. Above all, she believed that the poor needed respect since so many of them found appealing for help humiliating. "A man this morning said he stood on the corner for half an hour before coming into the office. He had never had to ask for help before. . . . Many feel as if they have lost a battle, trying to stretch funds on rocketing rents, utilities, food and clothing bills."<sup>2</sup>

Finding money for even this modest venture remained problematic until 1981, leading to ups and downs in attempting to expand staff with a second person and a part-time bookkeeper. Trinity Church early on applied for money from Poughkeepsie's Community Development fund. In 1976, the Satellite Center financed the start of its Emergency Food Bank through the federally financed Dutchess County Committee on Equal Opportunity (DCCEO). When Community Development cut funds for all agencies, other churches helped with a special fund-raising drive in 1979. The year before, the First Congregational Church took responsibility for opening the Children's Clothes Closet.

Financial relief came with United Way's decision to accept the Satellite Center as a member in 1980, providing a regular funding beyond what its previous contributors could give. The center became incorporated as Dutchess Outreach in 1981. In 1982, it opened the Lunch Box, an instant success. Trinity Methodist, St. Paul's Episcopal, and St. John's Evangelical Lutheran churches collaborated on the Lunch Box, providing midday meals six days a week for those in need, with no eligibility requirements. Initially located at St. Paul's Church, across from the Catherine Street

Center serving African Americans on Mansion Street, the program also received substantial grants from religious foundations. By 1986, Dutchess Outreach received its first FEMA funds for food and emergency assistance. At the end of the century, the Lunch Box had moved to the Family Partnership Center, not far away on North Hamilton Street. In 2003, the program served more than fifty thousand meals, adding another ten thousand in the next three years.

In 1985, Mary Keeley retired, but the example she set lived on in Dutchess Outreach. The *Poughkeepsie Journal* noted in 1983 how again and again she had "come to the rescue with food, clothes, advice and brisk, old-fashioned solicitude. She arranges rides, sorts clothes, accompanies clients to the welfare office and lugs groceries from supermarkets throughout the week. It's an unglamorous, never-ending business, which has kept her hopping in a 20-year fight against poverty." Noting that many clients come back again and again, she said, "You can't be judgmental in this job. ... I can just suggest things; I'm not their mother, heaven knows!" Yet "calling out behind her as she heads for a client" she told the *Journal* reporter, "but I do know I have to go to Social Services or this gal will be in trouble."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Poughkeepsie Journal*, August 1, 1983

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid