

Patricia Braatz, Woman of the Year 1981

From the AAUW newsletter in that same year.

Patricia Braatz, a single mother with four children was trained as a teacher. However, with the onset of multiple sclerosis, she could no longer drive, making employment difficult. She moved to this area from Putnam County and settled in Hyde Park. Patricia was active in the local chapter of Parents Without Partners. She was able to coordinate its activities etc. from her home. She was also active in the Multiple Sclerosis Society.

Despite being hampered by her illness and other setbacks, she continued to make contributions to her community. When asked to take on a job, she responds "I do it".

She's the '81 'Woman of the Year'

By Gerry Raker Journal staff writer, 1981



She always loved to walk, to sing and to be involved.

Multiple sclerosis affected her legs so she no longer walks without a cane. It affected her vocal chords, changing her from a soprano to an alto. But it has, if anything, increased Patricia Braatz's "involvement." And that is one of the reasons she has been selected as the 1981 "Woman of the Year" by "the American Association of University Women. This is "The Year of the Handicapped." But Mrs. Braatz's determination and dauntlessness would make her a winner any year.

A mother of four young children when she moved to Dutchess County in 1973, she was separated from her husband, knew no one, had no job and had never learned to drive. Her disease was in remission, as it had been since her 20s, but not having a driver's license meant her chances of finding work as a substitute teacher — something for which she was trained — were poor.

"But after joining Parents Without Partners I decided it would be better to work with adults rather than children for a change so I took a job coordinating home furnishings at Luckey Platt."

When the store closed in April, she was let go so she did some volunteer work at the Hyde Park Library. That "work" was to last only a week because in June, she went out of remission, "suddenly, after all those years, it was amazing."

The disease had stricken first shortly before her graduation from SUNY New Paltz in 1948. She married in 1951 and during the next seven years, while her husband was in service and in law school, there were two other attacks. The strongest residual affect was coordination, anything to do with her hands. Her handwriting, she claims was permanently affected so she taught herself to type.

Although advised not to have children "because of the stresses and strains in raising them," she had three daughters and a son. "I couldn't put safety pins in diapers too well, but I managed."

And "managed" is what she has done with a cheerfulness and confidence that is contagious. The 1977 attack confined her to a wheelchair for a while but it did not confine her involvement. The young woman who had sung in church choirs and was a member of her high school and college choruses, sororities and newspaper staffs; who went on, as a young married to teach in elementary schools all over the state; who, as a young Putnam County mother was a model volunteer at Butterfield Hospital and Butterfield Library, was not about to withdraw from people.

Apart from her children and volunteer work with the Hyde Park Historical Society and St. James Episcopal Church, since moving here from Cold Spring, the two major demands on her time have been the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society and Parents Without Partners (PWP) whose official telephone, is in her home.

After the serious 1977 attack, she sometimes had to be carried to MS meetings, but she got there. She cheers other MS members — who are all patients and number more than 100 — and helps them with practical information about hospital beds, nursing homes, etc.

"PWP is a constant though. Every day there are calls, mostly from people wanting information. The telephone is really my lifeline. I had a very rough time when I came up here, trying to support four children, not having a job, etc.

"The main thing was I found PWP immediately and I tell that to everyone. Get out and get involved. Meet people as soon as possible and get on some of those committees. Put into PWP what you're going to get out of it."

According to Mrs. Braatz, PWP's membership chairman, there are about 460 parents in the local PWP chapter which takes in Dutchess as well as parts of northern Westchester and southern Ulster counties.

"There are so many social activities and many things for parents to meet other people and also give children an opportunity to enlarge their scope. The average length of PWP activity is one to two years. We call it a link between married and single life, the adjustment period."

After that time, she said, members either remarry or gain enough friends — often through PWP — to function without the group" and their children seem to be able to be on their own then, too. It's an organization that is constantly getting new members, people who are separated divorced or widowed."

Most of the members are between the ages of 30 and 65, said Mrs. Braatz. The older ones may have children who are grown and they, themselves, are seeking companionship.

“in the last year, we have tried to work on one special meeting a month for widows and widowers and another for young parents who often share babysitting and financial problems. We have so many things there’s some activity every day of the week.”

And all these activities, as well as the collating of the newsletter, are usually put together at Patricia Braatz’s Hyde Park address where only one child, 14 year old Jean, is still at home. The eldest girls have finished college and are on their own and her only sons, John, “a very, very good saxophone player,” has been living with his father since Mrs. Braatz suffered her last MS attach.

You will find her taking names at the door at PWP’s Friday night dances. You will find her offering aid and comfort at MS meetings. But most of the time, you will find her manning the telephones – the green one for PWP calls, the black one foe everything else.



Next week AAUW will present her with a plaque, honoring her as their fourth Woman of the Year. Unhampered by disease or setbacks, she manages to make a contribution In her own words, “When I was asked to do a job, I’d do it.”