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PAT FARRELL

Leader Farrell left a lasting legacy on the region

Cliff White November 6, 2010 8:29pm EDT

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Pat Farrell, a 30-year Penn State faculty member, native of State College and active supporter of dozens of community organizations, died Thursday afternoon at age 76.



CDT file photo

Pat Farrell, 64, of State College, looks out over the countryside surrounding State College with the bike upon which she finished a cross-country journey in 1998.

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Farrell had Parkinson's disease and had been in failing health recently.

Farrell taught leisure studies at Penn State, where she broke several boundaries, becoming the first affirmative action officer and first administrative fellow at the university. After her retirement from teaching, Farrell headed the Centre County Community Foundation, the Central Pennsylvania Festival of the Arts, the Mount Nittany Conservancy, and volunteered for a host of charitable causes related to the university and the region.

“She was seamless in transition from her academic interests to her work in the community. As such, she was an inspiration to all of us on how to live and how to give,” said Bob Potter, a longtime friend of Farrell who volunteered with her at the Community Foundation and ArtsFest.

In 1998, Farrell was honored as Penn State's Renaissance Woman of the Year, a prestigious award given annually to prominent volunteers and philanthropists with university ties.

Farrell grew up in the College Heights neighborhood of State

College, and made friends with all the kids in her part of town, said childhood friend David Lee, one-time chairman and CEO of the former Omega Financial and 1997 Renaissance Man of the Year.

“One of the reasons I liked Pat so well is that she would play with older kids, younger kids, it made no difference to her. And she was a very good athlete,” Lee said.

Sports and recreation were constants in Farrell’s life. She received her bachelor’s degree in recreation from Penn State in 1956 and a master’s degree from the University of Minnesota two years later.

Through the next nine years, she taught women’s physical education at the University of New Hampshire, served as assistant director of the Harrisburg city parks and recreation department, ran the student union at Northern Illinois University and then was recruited by UNH to help create a recreation major at the school.

She returned to Penn State for good in 1967, earning a doctorate in three years and, immediately upon graduating, accepting a tenure-track teaching post. She taught in the health and physical education department, teaching students the ins and outs of recreational parks, and building the program’s size and popularity.

In the 1980s, Farrell became the university’s inaugural participant in a program designed to increase diversity among the administration. She shadowed Steve Garban, who at the time was senior vice president for finance and physical plant.

“She was a very talented person and had great common sense. She always approached things in a positive way, and was always for making things better, not tearing them down. I often sought out her advice and it was always solid and sound,” Garban said.

Farrell became an adviser to the program and counseled many individuals who came after her in the program. She even took on a mentee herself — Mary Dupuis, who went on to become the chancellor of Penn State DuBois.

Her life did not slow down after her teaching career ended in 1990. If anything, it got busier, according to Potter.

“She was always the first one in for a new project,” he said. “She was a great organizer and always ahead of us in how to make things happen.”

She reveled in her many successes but did not regret her few setbacks, including an attempt to create a summer home for the Pittsburgh Symphony in State College. Music was a lifelong accompaniment to her life; she played many instruments and was a member of the State College Choral Society and Pennsylvania Chamber Chorale.

Norma Condee, 89, knew Farrell for more than 60 years, first through the Choral Society and eventually as a close personal friend.

“I saw her be very formal when the occasion called for it, also saw her be wickedly amusing in a marvelous sense when she was with friends and being herself,” Condee said. “She had a way of getting along with everybody and anybody.”

Another friend of Farrell’s, Penn State trustee Anne Riley, said Farrell had an innate knowledge of how to motivate others.

“Her energy and positive outlook somehow got transmitted to her friends,” Riley said. “People liked to be with her because she had a great work ethic but also a great sense of humor.”

Her work ethic extended from raising money for causes she helped champion, such as the Renaissance Fund, which provides scholarships to Penn State undergraduates, to pounding nails into the several houses she helped build for Habitat for Humanity with an all-woman crew.

She was also a dedicated member of the State College Presbyterian Church.

In 1998, at age 64, Farrell completed a 3,615-mile cross-country bike trip. Bob Potter joined her for the first two weeks of the journey.

“I think I just recovered,” Potter joked. “It was a struggle to keep up with her.”

Farrell had “a zest for life that was unparalleled,” Potter said. She would climb Mount Nittany every New Year’s Day, according to Riley.

“She loved the mountains,” Riley said. “She used to say, ‘Hills are our friends.’ She mean that jokingly, of course, especially when she was crossing the Rockies on her bike. But she loved a challenge, and I think that statement could be a great metaphor to describe her life.”

During her acceptance of the 1998 Renaissance Woman of the Year award, Farrell commented on her experience in State College and on her philosophy of squeezing the most out of life.

“You know what the nicest thing about State College is? State College is small enough that you don’t have to be rich or famous to make something happen. All you need is energy and people to come out and pitch in,” Farrell said. “I feel I’m the luckiest person in the world. I’ve just done whatever the spirit moved me to do, and I’ve had a lot of fun.”

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