

A Tribute to Shirley Weiss

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On the evening of April 4, 1992, former colleagues and students of Shirley Weiss gathered at the Carolina Inn in Chapel Hill to pay her tribute. Part of the annual alumni weekend festivities, Shirley Weiss Day honored a woman who devoted more than thirty years of her life to city planning teaching and research, all of it at the University of North Carolina.

Shirley entered the Department of City and Regional Planning in 1956, becoming one of the first female students in the program. In 1942, she earned her BA in economics at Douglass College, Rutgers University, and that same year, she married Charles Weiss, her lifelong partner, travelling companion and patron of the arts. (Appropriately, Shirley and Charles celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary in Charleston, S.C., at their annual visit to the Spoleto Festival.)

Shirley's career in planning actually began when she accepted a position as an economist with the Maryland State Planning Commission in Baltimore. Later, she became Director of Research for the Commission, a position she left to enter the planning program at Carolina. While a graduate student in Chapel Hill, she became associated with Professor F. Stuart Chapin, Jr., as he was initiating the Urban Studies Program in the Institute for Research in Social Science. Funded by the Ford Foundation, the Program's landmark studies of urbanization in the Piedmont Crescent of North and South Carolina laid the groundwork for the strong research activity that was later to become the Center for Urban and Regional Studies. Throughout her career, Shirley maintained a close association with the Center as Research Associate, Principal Investigator, and Associate Research Director. It was during that same time that she completed her academic

work, earning her Ph.D. in economics from Duke University in 1973.

In time, Shirley developed her own research agenda and became highly successful in attracting research grants to the University. A large grant from the National Science Foundation allowed her to undertake the definitive study of new towns in the United States, comparing large-scale, new communities with conventional suburban development.

Future DCRP students will not have the opportunity to work with Shirley Weiss; however, they will certainly benefit by what she accomplished. Through creative application of scientific inquiry, pragmatism, and a sensitivity toward people and places, she made a name for herself and for the department through her work in urban revitalization and new town planning. Her research was of such import to the national urban agenda that she routinely obtained six-figure research grants, including one for \$1.28 million in 1971. This money brought not only prestige to the Chapel Hill program, but also enabled hosts of students to obtain a planning education.

On the night of the alumni celebration however, a more personal theme emerged from the testimony given by Shirley's friends. They spoke of a truly caring and devoted person, who inspired many through not only her work, but also through her behavior.

Department Chairman Michael Stegman framed this theme with his opening commentary: "By both word and deed, Jack Parker and our founding faculty let us know that teaching at DCRP was more a calling than it was a job. Jim Webb, Stu Chapin and Shirley Weiss made it clear that one doesn't come to Chapel Hill as a stepping stone to somewhere else. Rather, one comes to Chapel Hill to

be a teacher and a scholar and to stay and help build the department's legacy of excellence that's proudly passed on from one generation of faculty and students to the next.... As those of us who have chosen the academy as our professional calling know so well, the coin of the realm in teaching is touching young people and affecting their development in important ways. And none had touched the people they had taught as had Shirley."

Mike Wilson ('78), wrote in an autograph to Shirley: "Thank you for your inspiration. You made us believe that as DCRP students we were special, that we could do great things. The confidence you gave us accounts for much of what we have accomplished."

Clearly, Shirley represented the type of professor that all students hope to encounter—one who bestows more than knowledge, one who nurtures and instills confidence. As long-time colleague Ray Burby ('66) remarked, "She truly is a gentle person who mentors all about her, tries to help them develop themselves to be the best people they can (be).

"Shirley's approach was not to overpower students with what she had to tell them, but to try to help them understand what was happening in cities and to develop their own cognitive ability and to solve problems and to grow as individuals," Professor Burby explained. "Students of Shirley's whom I've talked to look back to her classes as chances when they could really sink their teeth into urban problems and make a contribution, or feel they were making a contribution, to their solution."

Shirley prepared students to be professional planners, using whatever role and form of motivation seemed appropriate. As Earl Armiger ('66) wrote to her in a letter read by Professor Stegman to the crowd of celebrants: "...you were my boss, thesis advisor, mentor, cajoler and, for a time, you were my roadblock to graduation. But I did graduate and felt indebted to you ever since. I am fortunate to have received the kind

of education DCRP provided and even more appreciative of the friendships that were begun and continue to this day and of the nurturing faculty which you represented."

Shirley's passion for planning engendered enthusiasm among her students, stressing a mode of intellectual inquiry that would enable them to be innovators on their own. "The way that Shirley responded to questions and struck sparks and tangents got you mobilized and... encouraged follow up investigation," Jim Gildea ('69) commented. "To challenge curiosity, to grow into insight, to critically hone that and develop it.... Do the analysis, test the hypotheses, and lay out a set of expectations. Shirley modeled that in her professional life and drummed that into us."

Her professionalism was exemplary, as many of her former colleagues and students attested. They lauded the letter-perfect detail of Shirley's work and her persistence for timeliness. More importantly, though, her success and the respect she received in a male-dominated profession made her a role model and inspiration to women seeking to become planners.

Shirley was the only female faculty member when Nancy Grden ('75) came to DCRP in 1973. "It was a time when feminism was at its peak," Grden commented. "It was very fashionable to find fault, to find holes, to find problems in the male hierarchy. The thing that struck me about Shirley at that time was... she... took the position that she could be much more effective advancing the cause of women simply by doing a good job at her profession--by being a good teacher, by being a good researcher, by being a valued colleague...."

Another Shirley Weiss protege, Nancy L. Randall ('84) wrote in an autograph to Shirley: "You inspired me; you supported me; you made me believe that I, a 'girl', could compete and succeed with 'the men.' I thank you for making me look at cities." This captures Shirley's work with

women students in the Department, and, for a time, as Acting Director of the University's Women's Studies Program.

Explicit in the comments of Shirley's former students and co-workers is her commitment to them. As Professor Ed Kaiser pointed out in naming some of Shirley's many attributes, it all comes down to *loyalty*: "She has it in super abundance for the people and the ideas and the institution that she stands for and believes in. She has very strong loyalty for the University... the Department of City and Regional Planning... to us alumni... and, most importantly, to her students. I think especially to women students and to black students, even before they become students, as applicants, Shirley is their advocate. There has never been to my knowledge a woman applicant or a black applicant who shouldn't get in this department and once in shouldn't graduate. Shirley would make her very own strong pitch. And that's to her credit and the students' credit and, ultimately, to the profession's credit, as well."

When Ray Burby finished his speech, Shirley took the podium to respond to the evenings accolades.

Just as she touched the lives of so many, she too appeared to be touched by what was said. With reflection and humility, she replied: "I remember Jim, Jack, Maynard and Stu's retirements, and they seem remarkable to me. These are remarkable people. And then to hear you say these things about me is just overwhelming. I hope I really live up to them."

Epilogue

Demonstrating their commitment to their work and to the University, as they retired, Charles and Shirley Weiss have made major gifts to the University which will fund an "Urban Livability Program". The Program will be initiated in September, 1992, with an Urban Livability Annual Prize Competition, open to all students at the University. The first prize winners will be announced at the Urban Livability Colloquium in April, 1993. The Colloquium will also see announcement of the first fellowship holders, and the designation of the first Floyd B. McKissick Resident Scholar in Community Development at the Center for Urban and Regional Studies. Details of the Program will be released soon.



Dr. Shirley Weiss and colleagues, circa 1976, celebrating the release of New Communities USA. Front row from left: Dr. Shirley Weiss, Barbara Rodgers, Dr. Thomas Donnelly, Mary Ellen McCalla. Back row from left: Dr. Edward Kaiser, Dr. Robert Zehner, Norman Loewenthal, David Lewis and Dr. Raymond Burby III.