

Margaret B. Geier Society Founded to Honor LADD's Donors

In honor of its founders, LADD is creating the Margaret B. Geier Society to recognize dedicated and visionary donors who give \$1,000 or more annually to support LADD's mission.

Peggy, as Margaret Bullock Geier was known, had "a knack for leading," according to her long-time friend Minor LeBlond. And Peggy did not let that gift go to waste. She and a host of dedicated volunteers initiated services for people with developmental disabilities—including LADD and Find A Way Apartments—that were groundbreaking for their day. Tragically, in 1989 at age 58 Peggy's life was cut short by cancer, but her joy and commitment to LADD live on in her family and friends, continuing to enrich the lives of thousands of people.

Today one of LADD's two apartment complexes is named the Margaret B. Geier Apartments in Peggy's honor. Although she did not live to see the first residents move in, she knew that it was being built and would be named for her. But Peggy's legacy is much more than a name on a building. Her life was an example of dreaming big dreams and persevering to make them come true. Those who knew her best speak of her in superlative terms. "She was like an angel," remembers Sis Geier, Peggy's daughter. Because Peggy was a leader in so many different important organizations, Minor insists that "everything in this city should have Peggy's name on it." Peggy's son Rodney Geier recalls admiringly, "My mom felt it was her duty to make something positive happen."

After graduating in 1948 from College Preparatory School (which later became part of the Seven Hills School), and attending Finch College in New York City, at age 20 Peggy married Eugene (Pete) Geier, a businessman with an entrepreneurial bent. As a young bride she joined the Junior League of Cincinnati in 1951 and for three years led a Girl Scout troop at Longview State Hospital, which served people with mental illnesses. While she remembered the experience fondly, that exposure gave her insight into the problems of institutionalization. Next, Peggy led a Girl Scout troop at Condon School, one of the first schools in the country designed to educate children with physical disabilities.

The Geiers were blessed with four children—Peter, Rodney, Adelaide (who is called Sis), and Jeffery. Sis, who today is 57 years old, has cerebral palsy, and when she was born few services were available for her. Peggy Geier had found her life's calling.

Already an experienced volunteer, Peggy joined forces with Cerebral Palsy of Cincinnati (now known as United Cerebral Palsy of Greater Cincinnati). While leading the Girl Scout troop at Condon School, she was put in charge of the school's day camp program. The first year the children went to traditional camps like Sharon Woods and Winton Woods, but the facilities were not user-friendly for young campers who had physical challenges. Peggy felt that the children deserved a place where they could enjoy a fuller camp experience.

At that time the Convalescent Aid Society owned the 23-acre Fresh Air Farm, which had been established in the 1890s to provide a place where inner city residents could escape the foul city air. But that program was in decline due to changing lifestyles and the organization was evaluating offers from various groups to determine the best use of their facilities and endowment. So Peggy's group of

concerned friends offered a proposal to use the property for a day camp for children with disabilities. “We were very smart. We said, ‘We don’t want your money. We just want the use of your land.’ ... We were practically the only people who didn’t want their money,” explains Minor. “We had to go out and raise our own money.” How did they do that? Minor raises her hand and makes a knocking motion in the air. “We knocked on doors and we asked,” she laughs. The Convalescent Aid Society accepted Peggy’s proposal.

At the same time, a group of Cincinnati business people led by William Anderson, then president of the Central Trust Company, wanted to start a community foundation similar to those begun in other cities to fund charitable projects. The Convalescent Aid Society donated its money to The Greater Cincinnati Foundation with the stipulation that Stepping Stones, as the day camp would be called, could use the property for as long as it remained in existence. The Convalescent Aid Society’s \$600,000 endowment became seed money for The Greater Cincinnati Foundation (today that \$600,000 has become an endowment worth more than \$2 million).

Thanks to Peggy’s vision and drive, the Stepping Stones Center was born in 1962. Minor says that Peggy came up with the name “Stepping Stones.” It became a United Way agency, and that relationship continues to this day. Stepping Stones still offers summer day camp experiences for children as well as a wide variety of year-round services for persons with disabilities from ages three to more than 70 years.

A pattern emerged that Peggy was to follow throughout her life: identify a problem, recruit talented people who could help solve it, and work hard. And with her leading the effort, everyone had a great time. “It was a lot of fun and I met a lot of interesting people,” says Minor, who befriended Peggy when they were teenagers and remained her best friend throughout life. “I never would have known half of them otherwise except through Peggy.”

In one of those life-has-come-full-circle stories, today Peggy’s daughter Sis volunteers four days a week in the adult program at Stepping Stones. Sis finds her work very rewarding and says she has discovered that she has a special gift for communicating with people who have a limited ability to speak.

Peggy was decades ahead of her time in her approach to raising her daughter Sis. In the 1950s it was common for persons with disabilities to be hidden away at home or banished to distant institutions; however, Sis was a part of the Geier family’s daily life. “Sis was a member of the family just like anybody else. She got criticized and praised just like everybody else did,” recalls her older brother Rodney. “It helped her develop a sense of belonging, which we all need.” For some of her growing up years, Sis attended St. Coletta, a boarding school in Wisconsin, where she learned how to take care of herself and how to socialize with other people. Although discipline was strict at the Catholic institution, Sis recalls with a smile that “they taught me how to be a lady.”

After founding Stepping Stones, Peggy was ready for the next adventure. “Peggy was ahead of the curve,” explains Minor. Somehow, Peggy got an idea that was extremely cutting edge for the time—that adults with disabilities could live independent, fulfilling lives. This concept was just beginning to germinate in a few places throughout the country. Peggy marshaled her friends, including Minor and Kath McLauren, Mary Schloss, Polly Strauss, Bob Gerhardt, and many others, and together they forged

into uncharted territory. Some members of this brave band were parents of children with disabilities, some were personal friends, and others were business and professional people in the community. Their talents, connections, and abilities combined to fulfill the vision of an education-based residential program to teach independent living skills to persons with disabilities—a vision that would become Living Arrangements for the Developmentally Disabled.

Looking back at what they accomplished, it is amazing how Peggy could attract just the right volunteers and inspire them to do wonderful things. “They changed the world for disabled persons while she raised three sons and a daughter,” says Peggy’s daughter-in-law Vallie Geier, who is married to Rodney. “She made a point of knowing the people she needed to know. Some of them were dear friends like Minor, Polly Strauss, Kath McLauren. But I think she made an effort to know the politicians, the movers and shakers, the people she needed to know in order to get things done.”

“She was a good judge of people’s strengths,” says Rodney. “She would ask certain people to do certain things that fit their skill set.”

“She had a passion,” adds Vallie. “She had a reason to do this. She surrounded herself with people who could run a business or who could help her with the law. Her friend Kath McLauren was a physician. She was probably a pioneer for women in medicine. So [Peggy] had people around her who could fill in the gaps in what she wasn’t able to do. But her biggest gift, I think, was getting people on board to help her accomplish her goals.”

Starting a new program from scratch was a huge challenge, but Peggy was up to it. “There were times she would get discouraged but she would use those times as pick-me-ups,” Rodney remembers. “That’s where my dad came in. He was pretty helpful to her in terms of keeping her focused and helping her see that she was accomplishing quite a bit even if she was discouraged when things weren’t moving as fast as she’d like. My dad probably helped her with the business parts of things. He was an entrepreneur and his counsel was very valuable to her. He was completely on board as well because some of this stuff had to do with his daughter and her future was a driving force as well.” Pete Geier died in 2009.

“She was always busy with meetings and calling people. She was quite an organizer as I remember,” Rodney continues. “She would have a mission in mind and if she wanted to get something done she would be very single-minded. But it really didn’t impact the family terribly much because she was very good at balancing things so she could do a lot of the LADD stuff and still have time to spend with the family. She’d have meetings sometimes at the house but she must have done a lot of the stuff during the day while we were at school or away.”

After Peggy and company launched LADD in 1975, its success soon led to a natural expansion of services to help people use their newly acquired independence skills. Find A Way apartments opened in Oakley, followed by Margaret B. Geier apartments in Kennedy Heights, providing community settings where people with disabilities could live with access to all the resources of their communities—banks, recreation, public transportation, churches, shopping, and employment opportunities. (Today LADD offers other services as well to help people with disabilities live in a variety of settings ranging from individual apartments to owning their own homes.)

Today Peggy's daughter Sis still lives in LADD's Find A Way apartment building. "I love it here because it's a safe building and I feel comfortable here," Sis says.

"I think both Mom and Dad would be really proud of her," says Vallie. "The world would be a better place if everyone were like Sis Geier." Rodney is happy for his sister: "Sis enjoys her life and has a lot of friends and people she feels close to. She is very enthusiastic about life.... It's always fun to take Sis back or pick her up at Find A Way because people are sitting outside in nice weather and the atmosphere there is so friendly and inclusive. It's always a big lift to be able to witness that. I remember one time I was picking Sis up [to travel to visit friends outside the city] and one fellow who lives there made a point as Sis was getting in the car to knock on the window. Sis rolled down the window and he told Sis to 'be safe,' and then he walked back in." It was a simple act, but it showed that he truly cared.

LADD has changed in the years since its founding in 1975. As Rodney notes, "LADD seems to get better all the time. They're doing more innovative things with their clients. They're expanding their mission. I think they're even more relevant than they were when it was founded." What would Peggy Geier think of LADD today? "I think she'd be pretty happy about it but I'm sure she'd find a challenge too. She'd want to make it better—and bigger," laughs Rodney. "I wish she were around today to see what it's become and how many people it's helped.... It's really awesome to look at the things she did accomplish in a relatively short life."

In addition to being the prime mover in founding Stepping Stones and LADD, Peggy served on several agencies' boards and was president of many, including Cerebral Palsy of Cincinnati, Family Service Agency of Cincinnati, Great Rivers Girl Scouts Council, Beechwood Home, the Mental Health Council, and Children's Hospital Medical Center. She was a member of the United Way Planning and Allocation Committee and served on the Greater Cincinnati Hospital Council's health committee. She was a Cincinnati Enquirer Woman of the Year in 1970. In an interview for that award she said about her involvement in multiple causes, "So many things tie in together. And if they don't perhaps they should."

In 1985 Peggy was the first person to receive the Easter Seal Society's Mary T. Schloss Award for leadership in improving the quality of life for persons with disabilities. In 1988 Peggy received the Norma Martin Goodall Alumni Award from Seven Hills School for significant contributions to the Greater Cincinnati community. A speech made while presenting that award said, "As much as any person in Cincinnati, Peggy Geier is the reason thousands of fine men and women who are developmentally disabled are living fruitful and rewarding lives. Imaginatively, tenaciously, and without fanfare, she has helped raise money to underwrite important medical research and was the prime mover to found Camp Stepping Stones..." In 1989 Peggy received the Cookie Nowland Award for leadership in community activities from the Junior League of Cincinnati.

Peggy's memory permeates LADD. The lovely fountain at LADD's Victory Parkway campus—the scene of countless photo opportunities over the years—was dedicated in honor of Peggy Geier. But perhaps her greatest "award" comes from her children, who admire and cherish her. "She taught me a lot of things, like good manners" says her daughter Sis. "When we were little she took care of us. She would remember everything.... I love her and I miss her like crazy."