

Hartford Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

Memorial Minute for Elizabeth Kincaid-Ehlers

1933 - 2024

GIRLS DON'T DO THAT

That refrain clanged
with menace over my youth.

—

"Girls don't do that." Well
I did. And was not sorry, am not sorry, only
pissed that "NO" was everywhere.

Wearing bluejeans? Taking
physics? Wanting to study
rocks? Girls did that.

So there.

(Excerpt from Elizabeth Kincaid-Ehler's poem "Girls Don't Do That")

Elizabeth was a complex and complicated person as reflected in the diverse range of her academic and professional accomplishments and interests. Even for those who knew her well, she remained a bit of an enigma, but had a strong voice, unassuming presence and clear, often boldly worded convictions. In many ways her life experiences are captured in her poems, described by her publisher as "a rich variety of moods ranging from despair to hope, resignation to determination, fury to love. And always there is that wry (and sometimes rueful) wit at play"

Elizabeth was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan where she spent her early years. She later attended the University of Michigan. While there, she received a Hopwood Award in poetry. She left the University during her junior year to marry William Howe Rueckert and moved with him to Troy, NY. She returned to Ann Arbor to complete her B.A. the following year. While raising her four sons and following her husband's career moves, she also managed to earn an M.A. from the University of Illinois and a Ph.D. from the University of Rochester.

Following the end of her marriage in 1979, Elizabeth moved to Connecticut as a visiting-writer-in residence at Trinity College and decided to settle in the Hartford area. Here she continued a variety of teaching assignments that had initially begun at the University of Illinois, Rochester Institute of Technology, the University of Rochester, and Eastman School of Music. After her writing residency at Trinity College, Elizabeth taught part-time at the University of Connecticut and as a visiting writer in several Connecticut public school systems. At one school, a 5th grader interviewed her for the school newsletter and although she had been introduced as Dr. Kincaid-Ehlers, in her published interview, she was called "Dr. Kinky Waller." In Elizabeth's words, her irrepressible alter ego had finally been named and she thereafter wrote many poems under that name

In the mid-nineteen eighties, Elizabeth followed another one of her many callings and retrained as a psychotherapist. She maintained an office at the Hartford Family Institute where she continued to assist

her clients well into her eighties. She was a religious skeptic who questioned the existence of a Christian God while also being a skillful practitioner of Gestalt Therapy which embraced and incorporated deep spiritual components.

Throughout her life Elizabeth was an accomplished writer, who, according to family legend, began making poems when she was three, engaging her mother as amanuensis. She occasionally sent her poems out into the world and eventually published three books of collected poems with Antrim House Books. In addition, her poetry, literary and psychological essays appeared in numerous collections, academic journals and books. Elizabeth read her poems at the inaugural Sunken Garden Poetry Festival at the Hill-Stead Museum and gave countless other poetry readings over many years. She enjoyed her regular meetings with a long-time group of poets who both sustained each other's work and gave each other a hard time. She received numerous awards for her writing including the North Country Poetry Prize and a Pushcart Prize.

In addition, Elizabeth was a talented musician who played the piano and dulcimer and had a particular fondness for bluegrass music and opera. She hiked, skied, and loved to travel, making two cross country driving trips as well as visits to Alaska, Europe, New Mexico, and Hawaii. She lived in Italy (traveling across the Atlantic alone at age 22 on a cargo ship), England, Canada and throughout the United States. But the one place that mattered most to her was the Thousand Islands in the St. Lawrence River where she had a house on Stave Island to which she returned every summer until she could no longer get in and out of the boat.

Elizabeth's introduction to Quakers was in England while participating in a peace march in London during the 1970S. She first attended a Quaker Meeting, Hampstead Meeting, around this time. Sometime later, while at Cambridge University for a year-long post-doctoral assignment in poetry, she attended Cambridge Friends Meeting at Jesus Lane, where she became a member. After she found Hartford Meeting in 1990, the Meeting became a place of great comfort and fulfillment for her. Over many years, she regularly occupied the same rear spot along the western wall of the Meetinghouse, and at times could be overheard offering her opinions or sharing a running commentary about the messages and announcements of various Friends. She participated in the Meeting's book club and provided a great service by proof-reading the Meeting's newsletter for a number of years. This was a task for which she was well-suited as she had a keen eye for punctuation, word selection and formatting. She valued her participation in several Creative Listening groups, the most recent on Zoom.

Elizabeth was a fighter who survived polio as a child and then cancer twice as an adult. She transformed her anguish at the latter into her third book of published poems titled "How Do / Hate Thee?" While she did not suffer fools lightly, her acerbic wit and occasionally sardonic comments belied deep compassion and a burning desire to see peace and justice prevail. Even as a child, she was moved by issues of social justice and felt called to activism. She became a lifelong advocate for the environment, civil rights, women's rights, and peace, participating in many protests, sometimes as an individual by simply holding a sign on a street corner and sometimes as part of a group.

The advent of COVID was a reminder to Elizabeth that her world was shrinking and she uneasily reconciled herself to her new reality, limited not only by the pandemic but increasingly by her mobility restrictions. Her presence with us in worship, although generally quiet, is much missed.

Respectfully submitted,
Ed Paquette and Liesa Stamm

Approved by Hartford Monthly Meeting, June 16, 2024

Accepted by Connecticut Valley Quarterly Meeting on May 4, 2025