

Memorial Minute for Sarah Spencer

Sarah Howe Spencer, beloved elder and Friend, died on September 29, 2023, her 74th birthday.

Sarah grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. In her youth she danced ballet. She continued with dancing, doing Morris Dance and partner dancing as an adult. Even in high school, her classmates noted her lively wit and commitment to social justice. After college she moved to Boston and met Shearman Taber. The young couple connected through common interests in dance and sailing. Sarah and Shearman raised two children, David and Jeanette, and later, Sarah had the joy of a granddaughter, Ramona. While her children were in elementary school, Sarah took courses in computer software engineering, an expertise she shared in her service to Quakers.

Sarah lived with visual impairments due to a genetic condition that from a young age gradually reduced her field of vision. She managed her personal and working life in a manner in which most people did not become aware of her impairment, and for which she rarely asked for accommodation.

Throughout her childhood Sarah attended services in the Episcopal Church, where she found the formal services with the "smells and bells" and theology unsatisfactory. Shearman introduced her to Quakerism, where she found a spiritual home and a lifelong community. Sarah developed a deep knowledge of Quakerism through her extensive readings and discussions with Friends from our various traditions. Her love for Friends was most clearly expressed through her wit and intellect, which she mobilized to provide care and support for her community.

Sarah had a concern for helping Friends increase their knowledge of Quakerism and its history, and making connections both within their meetings and throughout the Society. As part of her work with Beacon Hill Friends House, Sarah edited and published a long-running series of pamphlets highlighting contemporary Quaker voices. Sarah also coordinated the Quaker Studies Program, which was a joint program with Salem Quarterly Meeting. She was an early explorer of online Quaker learning programs through Quaker Studies.

While raising her children, she began teaching in First Day School, which eventually led her to become the coordinator of NEYM's Junior High Youth Group. She told a story of sleeping across the exit door at Woolman Hill during junior high retreats to keep the kids from encountering the local wildlife in the dark. Guiding the young teenagers in learning and using Quaker principles and practices gave her much joy and satisfaction.

Sarah's service to the Yearly Meeting was broad and deep with terms on various committees in many different roles. Her deepening understanding of the Spirit led her to participate in the School of the Spirit and serve on Ministry and Counsel for monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings. In her later years, she was widely known as an elder, a role that she cherished.

While on Ministry and Counsel, she was asked to edit the memorial minutes being read at Yearly Meeting Sessions. This led her to develop guidelines for writing memorial minutes. One of the challenges Sarah bequeathed to the authors of this minute was her understanding that a memorial minute was an account of a spiritual life and not a recounting of secular milestones.

She and Allison Randall developed and led “Daytreats” for local Meetings’ Ministry and Counsel, Worship and Ministry, and Pastoral Care Committees. These “Daytreats” were an opportunity for Friends serving on those committees in their local Meetings to talk about the joys and challenges of serving in those roles. They brought their wisdom and care for service to those times, enriching Sessions for those who participated and made connections to others serving in similar roles in their Meetings.

When she and Shearman moved to Northampton, Sarah was tapped immediately to serve on Worship and Ministry. She brought her deep knowledge of Friends and her wisdom to all the roles she filled. She had a slightly snarky sense of humor, which she often deployed when things got too serious. She could be forthright in sharing concerns, a quality which was not always appreciated, though her honesty and straightforward approach often kept discussions on course.

While on Worship and Ministry at Northampton, Sarah helped start Midweek Meeting, serving as a shepherd. This meeting has continued to develop into a wonderful community since moving to Zoom during the pandemic, with participants from Oregon to Philadelphia and even Great Britain. Her eldership and presence in that community is deeply missed, as is her wisdom and humor.

Sarah loved spending time with her family, particularly cooking and laughing together. Being with her through joys and challenges always felt like home for all of us—a feeling we may never experience in quite the same way again.

Northampton Friends Meeting
February 9, 2025

Accepted by Connecticut Valley Quarterly Meeting on May 4, 2025