

Obituaries

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MARY EADY, 85 WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Hardship made her want to help women

When she was 7, her father died leaving unpaid medical bills; she grew up watching her mother struggle

NOREEN SHANAHAN

*N*ils illegitimus carborundum – don't let the bastards grind you down – was Mary Eady's rallying cry to women. Eady was a feminist leader with a long reach, mentoring Canadian women from prisons to provincial and federal governments; from workers on shop floors to union executives. She was a tall, dignified, soft-spoken woman who packed a punch. She died in Ottawa on Nov. 16 at 85.

As Manitoba's first Women's Bureau director during Ed Schreyer's NDP government, she championed women's rights on issues including pension reform, daycare and employment equity.

Later, as deputy minister of labour under Howard Pawley's Manitoba New Democrats, she increased the range of her influence. Eady also worked for the Canadian Labour Congress in Ottawa as director of the Women's Bureau, harkening back to her early days as a union activist with the United Packinghouse Workers.

"Are you one of those women's lib types?" people would ask her.

"Yes!" she would say, with a gentle smile. "Isn't everybody?"

Frances Lankin was a young woman working as a prison guard at Toronto's Don Jail when she first spoke with Eady in the late 1970s. She refers to this encounter as a Ms. Magazine "click" moment.

"I remember Mary saying to me that women need to be able to live, to survive, and thrive, and to lead and support families ... she was absolutely instrumental in helping me at a point in time where I was just awakening to these issues."

Lankin went on to become an equal opportunities co-ordinator for the Ontario Public Service Employees Union. She was later MPP and cabinet minister in Bob Rae's Ontario NDP government, worked with the Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare and was provincial spokesperson for the Equal Pay Coalition.

"[Eady] led the way, but she developed a large number of us to keep that progress moving," Lankin said.

Mary Gilchrist was born in Toronto on April 9, 1926. Her father, Robert, managed a lumber company that went bankrupt at the start of the Great Depression. He moved his family to Ottawa in 1931, hoping to land another job, but this didn't happen. Instead, he got sick, couldn't pay the doctor's bills, and died within a year. He left his wife, Jessie, a widow with three small children. Mary, sandwiched between two brothers, was seven years old.

Watching her father die was the first in a long line of "click" moments for Mary, leading her along the road toward social activism. The clicks increased as she watched her mother struggle to support the family on wages from selling hats at Eaton's in Toronto.

Growing up, Mary found role models not only in her mother but also in her grandmother, who



Mary Eady worked in government and with the union movement to improve the lives of working women.

had been an admirer of Agnes Macphail, the first woman to be elected to the House of Commons in 1921. And then there was Gertie Cameron, a widowed immigrant with two small children who lived across the hall and told inspiring stories about life as a Toronto garment worker in the 1930s.

"She'd leave [her children] at home – there was no daycare – so she'd leave them at this place, doing crayoning and things whilst she was away, terrified," recalled Eady in a 1991 interview by personal historian Barbara Brandreth.

Eady quit school at 16 and took a job in the Ontario Hydro mail-room. One day, her mother read a notice in the Toronto Star about an upcoming meeting of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation. They attended.

Eady joined the CCF Youth Movement and attended weekly study groups. She attributed the group's success to the postwar period, when many progressive ideas flourished in Canada.

"I often think wars have side effects that planners of them never dream of. Some of them are bad, but some of them are good in the sense of liberating old ideas and old myths that people have," Eady said. Women now had chances they hadn't had before.

In 1946, Eady moved to Ottawa for a term as national secretary of the CCF Youth Movement on the party's federal council. She returned to Toronto in 1948 and

began her career as a labour activist with packinghouse workers. Their union represented food processors, 20 per cent of whom were women. She quickly became editor of their newspaper, The Canadian Packinghouse Worker.

It was a challenging time for an inspired feminist working a decade before Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. When Eady took over the paper, the "woman's page" featured fashion tips about "fitted princess-line frocks with puffed pockets." She soon replaced this with survival tips for women working in the stockyard killing rooms at half the pay of their male co-workers.

In one editorial she wrote: "The union feels that as long as the company refers to them as 'girls' they will pay them as 'girls' and not as the experienced women they are."

She met Francis Eady in 1953, a British trade unionist who had recently moved to Toronto. They married a year later and she kept busy not only with the newspaper but also running education seminars for women at Canada Packers. In 1957, she quit working to start a family. She also became a volunteer editor of the NDP's national newsletter. In 1963, her husband's work took the family back to Ottawa, where she increased her volunteer commitments as treasurer of the federal NDP. One of her pals was Tommy Douglas.

The Eady family moved to Win-

ipeg in 1970, and Francis became executive assistant to newly elected NDP premier Ed Schreyer.

Then tragedy struck. Francis was diagnosed with cancer and died within two years. Shades of her mother's life – she was a young widow with two small children to support.

"She was devastated when my dad died, but she had to pick up the pieces and carry on and get a job and put a roof over our heads," said her son, Don Eady.

In 1972, Eady became the first director of the Women's Bureau for Manitoba. She organized women's conferences with the Manitoba Federation of Labour and worked to change government policies on issues like childcare, family law, pension reform and pay equity. She invited colleagues to her cottage to brainstorm, calling her country home "Liberation Lodge."

In 1977, Eady moved back to Ottawa once again and became the first head of the Women's Bureau at the Canadian Labour Congress. During her four years in this position she ran dozens of workshops for union women at a labour school in Port Elgin, Ont.

According to Lankin, who attended one of these workshops, Eady talked about accessibility to non-traditional jobs and how women deserved to be paid at a level commensurate with their skills.

"There were so many of those issues, that she taught us about,

and inspired us to think about, and motivated us to organize, to accomplish," Lankin said.

Eady once had an unusual group of students in her class. Just as she was heading into the building, three motorcycles roared up to the door. "Men got off with leather jackets and those bracelets with big steel knobs," she said. "I thought: 'Thank goodness they're not going to be in my class!' Well, to my surprise, they were!"

The men were Hamilton steel workers who had harassed women co-workers. Their union had sent them for sensitivity training.

In 1981, Howard Pawley's NDP government won the Manitoba election. The new premier called Eady back to be the province's first female deputy minister of labour. Her agenda regarding women's issues didn't dramatically change – she just had more power to make things happen. Manitoba became the first government in Canada to pass pay equity laws.

Eady lost her job when Gary Filmon's Progressive Conservatives won in 1988. She became a consultant for the Canadian Labour Congress and the federal government. On the day she died, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in favour of pay equity for women at Canada Post.

Mary Eady leaves sons Donald and Peter and four grandchildren.

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