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Time to recognize Betty Friedan in her hometown

Betty Friedan helped change America, but don't go looking around her hometown for any kind of acknowledgement of it.

Four years after her death and nearly a half-century since she published her landmark book, "The Feminine Mystique," Peorians — citizens of a place she praised for its "solidarity," "rootedness" and "can-do spirit" — have yet to create any kind of tangible reminder that she grew up here. As we've written before, that should change.

A group of local women has the same concern and over the last couple of years has begun to shine attention on the lack of a visible remembrance for Friedan. On Feb. 4 — Friedan's birthday and the anniversary of her death — they plan to ramp up that effort with an event at the Lakeview YWCA in Peoria for the woman who is widely remembered as the mother of modern feminism.

Indeed, Friedan's masterwork of 1963 codified the thoughts that would drive the push for gender

equality from the workplace to the classroom to the home. She co-founded the National Organization for Women and was an outspoken advocate for her causes. At the time "The Feminine Mystique" came out, women made up one-third of college graduates but a scant 3 percent of dentists, lawyers and doctors. Today women account for around 60 percent of college graduates and roughly half of all medical and law students. Talk about opening doors; talk about your revolutions.

So absolutely, there should be seminars and lectures and vigorous discussions about her legacy, for better and worse, for college kids at Bradley University. Absolutely, there should be a weighty, substantive exhibit on her at the forthcoming Riverfront Museum. Absolutely, there are multiple ways that Peoria can acknowledge that it produced Betty Friedan.

Alas, Peoria has long had a love-hate relationship — sometimes, mostly the latter — with those native sons and daughters who went on to make the biggest splashes. The late comic

Richard Pryor certainly comes to mind. Those who'd argue that Peorians should pretend as if Friedan never existed simply because they disagree with her objectives or beliefs are missing the point. Recognition is not always synonymous with celebration. Sure, Friedan was controversial, even among her peers. How many game changers aren't?

In fact Friedan was a pioneer, influenced profoundly by growing up in central Illinois, who changed the way Americans and beyond look at the world. Many of the issues she championed and fought for remain hotly debated. There's no denying her impact on the culture. We can learn an awful lot from it. She would make just about any short list of most influential women of the last half century.

In fact Peoria has produced consequential people; all communities can use reminders of that. For too long we've turned our backs on some of them. It's time to stop doing so with Betty Friedan.