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Betty Friedan: The first lady of feminism

Peoria's least celebrated icon

By DeWayne Bartels  
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Betty Friedan rose to international prominence, an architect of the worldwide women's movement, a tour de force for equality.

Yet in Peoria, Friedan is Peoria's least celebrated icon.

In contrast, when soft-rock star Dan Fogelberg died in December 2007, plans began immediately to find a way to mark his passing. In September 2008, signs designating "Fogelberg Parkway" — an honorary street designation of Abington Street from Prospect Road to Adams Street — were erected.

Third District Councilman Bob Manning said at the time,

"My only regret is we didn't do this earlier."

Fran Kepler, who met Friedan years ago, said there is a big difference between Fogelberg and Friedan, which explains why there is such a disparity in the marking of the passing of each.

"She was controversial," Kepler said.

"She held up a mirror and made us look at ourselves. People sometimes don't like what they see when that happens."

Efforts underway

Dorothy Sinclair, only the second woman to hold a seat on the Peoria City Council, is busy trying to create a memorial for Friedan. The chosen effort is to rename the YWCA

Lakeview Daycare Center for Friedan.

Sinclair and several other local women are working to raise \$100,000 to create the memorial.

Sinclair said she hopes the effort will be complete by this time next year.

"But, everybody in Peoria is trying to raise money right now," Sinclair said. "We're aiming our primary attention on women. Successful women today are standing on the shoulders of the women who went before them."

Sinclair said it is important to have a fitting tribute to Friedan in her hometown. Kepler said re-naming a daycare center is fitting.

"We need a living, breathing thing as a tribute to Betty," Kepler said.

pler said.

Still, Sinclair said she expects an uphill battle to raise the money in this economy.

"Women who are usually confident about giving money are uncertain right now," Sinclair said.

Icon and pariah

Sinclair views Friedan as a figure Peorians should be proud of, but admitted it was hard to like her.

"She was not popular in Peoria," Sinclair said.

"She was not a perfect personality. She never really clicked with people."

Kepler agreed, saying, "She had a brusque personality."

But, both said, personality aside, Friedan was a figure the city should be proud of and



honor appropriately.

"She personally changed many people's lives," Sinclair said.

"She said it was OK to

work and have a family. She changed society. She told women that we were

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husband and children by going to work or volunteering."

Kepler called Friedan the "catalyst" for the third wave of feminism in the nation.

"She put into words what women like me were thinking," Kepler said.

Dolores Klein, a long-time

women's activist, said Friedan's importance is unrecognized in this city.

"For a long time, I didn't consider her a hero," Klein said.

"I was a traditional Catholic. It took some time for me to come around and recognize how important she was. Like a lot of us, it took me time to come around and accept radical ideas."

Klein said to Friedan's credit, she is still controversial.

"Everything good happened in this city from people who were considered," Klein said.

"I don't think you estimate the democratic organizations like NOW, even by live under the benediction of the pioneers organizations. It's a lot to change minds."

Who is Betty Friedan?

- Betty Friedan was launched onto the world stage in 1963 with the publication of her book, "The Feminine Mystique." The book said, simply, women could work and volunteer outside the home and still be mothers and wives.
- Friedan was born Feb. 4, 1921 as Betty Naomi Goldstein in Peoria. Her parents were Jewish.
- Friedan graduated summa cum laude from Smith College in 1942. She received a research fellowship to study psychology as a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley.
- Her first book, "The Feminine Mystique," became a national best seller and propelled her to the forefront of the women's liberation movement.
- In 1966, she helped found the National Organization for Women (NOW), and became its first president.
- In 1971, Friedan helped form the National Women's Political Caucus, for feminists who sought change through the traditional political structure.