MARCIENE MATTLEMAN, ‘A FORCE OF NATURE, AN IMMOVABLE OBJECT, AN IRRESISTIBLE FORCE,’ DIES AT 89

The Philadelphia educator and social entrepreneur focused on big-picture problems, founding several nonprofit organizations.

Dave Mezzacappa | March 31, 2019

Marciene Mattleman had a philosophy: If you care enough about something to complain about it, then you should care enough to do something about it.

And she did.

Throughout her long career in Philadelphia as an educator and social entrepreneur, she focused her attention on big-picture problems that needed solving: the need to address the functional illiteracy of more than a quarter of Philadelphia adults. The need for children to be safe and productively occupied during after-school hours. The need to help low-income, first-generation students gain admission to college and persist once they were there.

So she thought up and founded Philadelphia READS, After School Activities Partnerships (ASAP), Philadelphia Futures, and Youth Education for Tomorrow.

Mattleman, who had Parkinson’s disease, died Friday at age 89.
"Marciene had the strongest bias for action of anybody I’ve ever met,” said Ralph Smith. He first met her in 1982 when her husband, Herman, was president of the Board of Education and Smith was chief of staff to Superintendent Constance Clayton. “There wasn’t a single problem about which she complained or cared about that she did not figure out how to take some action around it. In many respects, that made her seem peripatetic, but that was the animating principle on which she worked."

She was legendary for never taking no for an answer.  

“She was a force of nature, an immovable object, an irresistible force,” said Smith, who now heads the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.

In 2015, when her health was just beginning to fail, three Philadelphia mayors were among the more than 100 people who came to honor her when she retired as chair of the board of ASAP.

The current mayor at the time, Michael Nutter, gave her a citation from the city that noted, among other things, that she “started more service programs than any other person in the city’s history."

He also spoke wryly but affectionately about the “immovable object” part of her character.

“My general policy is whatever Marciena is calling about, just say yes and save a half-hour," said Nutter.

Former Mayor Ed Rendell told his favorite Mattleman story – not coincidentally, one that struck the same tone as Nutter’s.

Roughly, it went this way: She would call on a Monday with her latest big idea. The mayor would politely say “no” and gently hang up.

But that was not the end of it. She would keep calling.

“By Thursday, I realized that you should never say no to Marciena Mattleman,” said Rendell, who called her both “impossible” and “truly an angel."

When former Mayor Wilson Goode was in office, he started the Mayor’s Commission on Literacy at Mattleman’s instigation. She became its first executive director. At the 2015 tribute, Goode called her “one of the most unselfish, dedicated public servants I’ve known.”

Adult literacy was an issue close to his heart; Goode’s father, a farmer in the South before moving here, could not read or write. At the time, it was estimated that 40 percent of Philadelphia adults struggled to read.  

“I did not know that I would find the perfect person who would be the director and take it beyond all my wildest expectations,” Goode said. “I did not need to give her instructions; she had a different idea every day, sometimes two, or three, or five. No other mayor in the country had a literacy program anywhere near what we had here.”

Joseph Torsella, now the state treasurer, is a protege of the Mattlemans, first meeting them when he was still a student at the University of Pennsylvania and they were all working on Goode’s campaign. He said at the 2015 event: “She is one person who, through sheer force of will, can change an entire city."

He said he learned from Marciena “the power of relentless compassion."

Philadelphia Futures and its flagship program, Sponsor-A-Scholar, grew from the inspiration of Eugene Lang and George Weiss, wealthy philanthropists who, in the 1980s, each offered free college educations to a randomly chosen group of low-income students. Their programs – and one later founded by city educator Ruth Wright Hayre – also offered the students tutoring, mentoring, and generalized support as they pursued their college dreams.

Mattleman reasoned that people who couldn’t afford such generosity could nevertheless contribute either smaller amounts of money or their time as mentors or tutors to help individual students. Sponsor-A-Scholar has helped more than 1,000 students since 1989.

Last June, although she was using a wheelchair and finding it difficult to talk, she honored the Notebook by attending our annual fundraiser, which was held at the National Museum of American Jewish History.

On learning of her death, civic activists posted tributes on Facebook. David Fair, a longtime advocate and former city official who is now an executive at Turning Points for Children, wrote that she made “the future brighter for generations of Philadelphia children and tirelessly focused on creating opportunities to help young people succeed.” Her work lives on through the organizations that she founded “and through the inspiration, her life of service to the betterment of the community will continue to provide to new generations of children’s advocates,” he wrote.

Born and raised in Wynnewood, and educated at Temple, Mattleman said in a 1993 profile that her businessman father and homemaker mother set an example for her.
“They found causes they thought were important,” she said. “They were not people necessarily who were well-schooled, but they knew what was important in life. ... I got that sense of giving back.”

That profile was written when she was being awarded the MCP/Gimbel Philadelphia Award, one of the city’s most prestigious honors, given annually to a woman in the region and occasionally to a national figure. Begun in 1932 by the founder of the Gimbels department stores, other recipients have included Eleanor Roosevelt and Sandra Day O’Connor.

In 2008, she won the Philadelphia Award, the highest civic honor the city bestows, for her work in creating “successful, innovative programs to help inner-city students compete academically.”

Mattleman started out as a 6th-grade teacher and raised three children while completing her Ph.D. in education at Temple, where she then taught for many years. In addition to her husband, to whom she was married for more than 68 years, she is survived by daughters Barbara Kaplan and Ellen Kaplan, who is the city’s chief integrity officer; son, Jon; six grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

Donations in her memory can be made to the Marciene Mattleman Founder’s Fund at After School Activities Partnerships, 1520 Locust St., Suite 1104, Philadelphia 19102, or to a charity of the donor’s choice.

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