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Dean was advocate for disabled

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WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



Shirley Dean

Omahan Shirley A. Dean's life was a fight to make other people's lives better.

For Dean, who died Friday at 68 after a battle with cancer, advocacy for those with developmental disabilities was not only a career but also a passion. The thought behind Dean's lifelong efforts, her brother Paul Dean said, was that people with disabilities should be treated with the same respect as anyone else.

Funeral services will be Tuesday at 2 p.m. at Heafey-Heafey Hoffman West Center Chapel, with burial Wednesday at 11 a.m. in the Masonic Cemetery in Des Moines.

Shirley Dean served most recently as a consumer and family coordinator at the Munroe-Meyer Institute at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, but her career in advocacy had been long and varied, including extensive volunteer work.

After graduation from Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1964, she moved into social services, eventually focusing her career and volunteer efforts in the area of developmental disabilities.

Dr. Bruce Buehler, former director of the Munroe-Meyer Institute, worked with Dean for 25 years.

"She always has been an advocate," he said. "She was on multiple boards for special needs people, she was a resource to families, an advocate at the state. She was always available when they had families that needed help, direction or services.

"She was a friend to an awful lot of families with children with special needs."

Barbara Jessing, clinical director of Heartland Family Service, worked with Dean in the 1970s and early 1980s.

"The word we keep hearing is 'tireless advocate,'" Jessing said. "She never gave up on the things that were important to her."

Fred Zydek, a longtime friend, worked with Dean and called her a dear friend with strong ideals.

"She was just so committed to her vision and philosophy that she would fight like a tiger to make sure people were getting their rights," he said. "She just could convince people because she truly believed what she was talking about."

Dr. Ed Skarnulis, a retired professor from Texas A&M University-Commerce, worked with Dean in the 1970s at the Eastern Nebraska Community Office of Retardation, which Skarnulis said was the first community-based program for people with mental retardation.

"She did not have the kind of ego a lot of people have, and she was really reluctant to take credit for things," Skarnulis said. "But literally thousands of people over the years ... had contact with her, and she was absolutely committed to serving that population."

In the 1970s, Dean co-founded the Pilot Parents program, a support network for parents whose children had developmental disabilities. She also was involved in the creation of Project 2, a program for disabled adults that became People First, now a national program.

Dean also was one of the people who helped craft the Douglas County Plan, which detailed how to provide services for people with

developmental disabilities in their own communities, keeping people close to their families.

“It was the first systematic statement that we don't need institutional environments for anybody with disabilities,” Skarnulis said. “Nebraskans simply have no idea how innovative they were (in the treatment of people with developmental disabilities), in a large measure because of people like Shirley.”

Zydek agreed. “She did a lot of incredible work,” he said.

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