

February 20, 2009

Section: Local

Edition: Final

Page: B3

Pioneer who helped bring Del. 4-H club to prominence dies

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The News Journal

Longtime Delaware 4-H leader Joy Lynn Gooden Sparks of Newark, who touched tens of thousands of families through the youth-club program, died Tuesday at home, surrounded by family including her husband, Don.

Sparks, 57, had fought cancer in recent years, he said.

She led Delaware 4-H to prominence with more than 70,000 children in last year's programs -- or 47 percent of all eligible children, more than twice the rate in any other state.

A celebration of her life is set for 3 p.m. Monday, with family visitation to start two hours earlier, at University of Delaware's Clayton Hall in Newark, where a reception will be held afterward. Interment will be private.

In addition to her husband of 24 years, Sparks is survived by parents Betty Lou and Dan Gooden, sister and brother-in-law Dana and Richard Sharpe, brother and sister-in-law Alex and Barbara Gooden and brother Richard Gooden, all of Wyoming, Del., nieces, grand-nephews, siblings-in-law -- and Winston, her Scottish terrier.

Instead of flowers, donations may be made to the Joy G. Sparks Memorial Fund at the Delaware 4-H Foundation, 113 Townsend Hall, 531 S. College Ave., Newark, DE 19716, or the Joy G. Sparks Scholarship in care of the director of development, University of Delaware, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 531 S. College Ave., 113 Townsend Hall, Newark, DE 19716-2170.

Born in Milford, Sparks graduated from Caesar Rodney High School in 1969 and the University of Delaware in 1973, with a degree in home economics.

She started a 35-year career in the university's Cooperative Extension Service, through which she had been one of the state's leading 4-H'ers as a child and teen -- winning a national achievement award and numerous county medals for projects and blue ribbons in competitions including the Delaware State Fair.

Later, she became a director of the fair and the first woman vice president on its executive committee.

Sparks rose from New Castle County 4-H agent to area 4-H agent in 1980 and state leader in 1993. She held national 4-H posts and provided leadership in the new 4-H Military Partnership in Delaware, partnering with Delaware National Guard and Dover Air Force Base to involve deployed troops' children -- an effort commended by the military and national 4-H groups.

Sparks played a vital role in starting the Delaware 4-H Foundation, helping raise \$300,000 in its first endowment campaign, during 4-H's 100th anniversary.

In 2002, she received the foundation's debut Jim Baker Memorial Award for Service to Delaware 4-H, named for the state leader during her youth. She also was the first recipient of UD's Ratledge Family Award for Public Service in 2004.

Her many other awards included honors from the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents, UD Extension's Perpetual Lighthouse Award, proclamations from the state House and Senate, and the Farm Bureau's Distinguished Service to Agriculture Award.

She also was a member of groups outside 4-H, having served as president of her civic association, UD Women's Club, Delaware Home Economics Association, UD College of Education and Public Policy Alumni Association.

Her husband said he was touched by comments at her tribute site, <http://joysparks.blogspot.com/>.

"What it seems people remember most about her," he said, "is her smile."

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