

# THE HOPKINS ADVOCATE

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Margaret - I thought you  
might be interested in  
this -

Nancy Stephens

## DOING THE CARING THING Ruth D. Voelker Memorial Fund Supports Oncology Nursing

William and Ruth Voelker lived their whole lives in Highlandtown, the Baltimore community known for its trim rowhouses, scrubbed marble steps, and hardworking residents. Their house, flush with a rosy interior, family portraits, and Ruth's cut crystal collection, exudes warmth and a loving touch. You know this is home.

It was in bad disrepair when they bought it early in their marriage while living with Ruth's parents down the street. William and his father-in-law spent two years putting it back into shape. Here the Voelker's daughter, Carol, grew up, friends and relatives gathered to laugh and talk, church business was organized, and special events and vacations planned.

Ruth is gone now. She died in September after a two-year struggle with cancer, but the energy and love she devoted to others in her lifetime lives on. It still hurts to talk about her, but William Voelker makes clear that it was Ruth's penchant for planning that helped him get through the worst of times and that led to his establishing a wonderful tribute to his wife's memory: The Ruth D. Voelker Memorial Oncology Nursing Fund.

"Ruth and I discussed it before she died," he says, the pain of loss suffused with recollection of her courage and determination to do the caring thing. "She told me, 'You don't need all that stock. Give it to Hopkins.' She knew she was going to die and she made all sorts of decisions, telling me what kind of casket she wanted, what to do with her clothing, which hymns she wanted at her memorial service. It was very hard at the time to listen, but it helped in the end."

The story behind the \$168,000 worth of stock with which Voelker established the memorial fund is a tribute to his own hard work and penchant for planning.

Son of a lumberyard employee, he attended one of Baltimore's premier public high schools, Polytechnic Institute, run by the formidable Principal De Hoff. "When all the boys were packed into the auditorium for the first assembly, they were making a fair racket," Voelker recalls. "De Hoff came in and walked to the front and said, 'We don't do things like that here. By the time I get to the center of the stage, I don't want to hear a pin drop.' When he got to the podium, he said, 'I'm

going to call out the names of the first 40 boys and as they are leaving for their classrooms I am going to call out the names of the next 40 boys, and you are going to be still so that they can hear their names.'" De Hoff got the quiet he demanded, and the next time he walked into assembly, the boys immediately came to order. "Can you imagine that happening these days?" asks Voelker with a laugh.

Graduating from Poly in 1943, Voelker signed up for the Air Force and eventually served as a military photographer on the island of Tinian in the Pacific. Returning to Baltimore after the war, he got a job with Standard Oil and spent the next 12 years doing laboratory work. He also attended Hopkins' McCoy College (now the School of Continuing Studies) in the evenings, working on a bachelor of science in industrial management. When the formation of Exxon shut down the Standard Oil plant, he spent a short time in management training at Food Fair ("which I hated," he says) as he sought a position at the McCormick Spice Company.

He started in Research and Development at McCormick's Light Street headquarters, moving with the division to Hunt Valley in the 1960s. "When I got my degree, I worked up to Technical Sales Supervisor," he says. After 10 years in research he moved to the Industrial Products Division ("a fancy name for the flavor division"). "Among other things," he says, "I was chief cook and bottle washer, production manager, quality control manager, and finally director of quality assurance. It's funny; I worked at McCormick for 29 years but I never could tolerate onions and garlic."

Onions and garlic aside, Voelker felt at home in the family-run McCormick Company and readily took advantage of its stock-option program. "Every two years or so we could take 10% of our salary in stock; in addition, management could take stock options with five years to pick them up," he explains. "I was very fortunate to be able to do this at a time when McCormick did very well. I exercised the option and was able to buy many shares at a wonderful price. We were very lucky; we were at the right place at the right time."



William and Ruth Voelker

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The Voelkers lived a full but modest life, the one big indulgence being a fur coat William got for Ruth several years ago, which she seldom wore. "The things that were important to Ruth," says Voelker, ticking them off, "were, number one, house—me—parents—daughter and, number two, church." They both devoted a great deal of time to their church, the nearby United Evangelical/United Church of Christ. Ruth was involved in many church groups and would organize the mother-daughter banquet each May. William sat on three pastoral search committees, chairing the most recent one, and still has stamina enough to be the current church treasurer, a record that amazes anyone who has ever served in these capacities. "The church has been wonderful to us," he says. "I was concerned about the memorial service, and they told me not to worry about a thing. The church was packed for her service, and they held a lunch for everyone afterwards."

They went bowling together ("Ruth was competitive, she hated to lose," he says, shaking his head with a smile) and loved to eat out at Haussner's, the grand old dame of Baltimore restaurants, which probably displays more art per square inch than Hearst castle. "Once we were eating there when our daughter was little," Voelker says with a twinkle in his eye, "and were seated by an oil painting of a nude. I joked that I was going to take it home because I was having a poker game, and Carol turned to Ruth and said, 'Don't let him do that, Mother. That woman is bare!'"

The Voelkers took many trips together as a family. "We made sure our daughter saw things," Voelker says. "We took Carol from the time she was small enough to hold on my lap." They visited places like Williamsburg, Atlanta, New Orleans, Mystic, Cape Cod, and Disney World. "If you want to talk about something getting on your nerves, it's hearing 'It's a Small World' over and over again!" he says. "We took a lot of bus tours

because Ruth was afraid of flying. Once we went with friends on a guided tour of the West Coast, which involved some air flights. We bounced a little coming in, and I had marks on my arm from her clinging to me."

Airplanes may have daunted Ruth, but not death. She fought the good fight, undergoing chemotherapy and surgery for her cancer while cheerfully making plans to make sure everyone else felt good. "Everybody liked Ruth," Voelker says. "Even when she was sick, she was upbeat and kept her sense of humor. When she first got sick about two years ago, she decided we should take a trip to Florida with our friends, even though she had almost no energy. Then she proposed, 'Why don't we have a big party on our 45th anniversary in case I can't make it to our 50th?' so we had a big celebration at the Brass Elephant. We have a videotape of it, and I find it very hard to watch."

Ruth died 14 days before their 46th anniversary. She had by that time grown quite fond of Drs. Rima Couzi and Ian Flinn and the Oncology Center nurses, particularly Michelle Germack. "Michelle managed her care, and Ruth really liked her," says Voelker. "She would call Ruth, answer her questions. But all the other nurses were very nice as well."

The graciousness and generosity of their care prompted Voelker to endow the fund he and Ruth had discussed on behalf of the Oncology Center nurses. The fund will be used to recognize clinical excellence, advance research in cancer nursing, develop programs to enhance patient care, and support oncology nursing education.

"The nurses were constantly around," says Voelker. "They were there if you needed them." Just like Ruth. What more fitting tribute could a husband create for his wife than a fund that perpetuates that kind of care?



**Ruth Voelker lived life to the fullest up to the end. Here the Voelkers pause for a photograph during a trip to Florida she planned amidst her chemotherapy and surgery.**