

Remembering Selma Shapiro

(as published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on June 28, 2011)

The positive response to the *Historically Speaking* series featuring Selma Shapiro's oral history transcript was overwhelming. It was originally my intent to include comments from some of the staff and a few volunteers. I also hoped to say a word of thanks for all the help provided me with not only that series, but the earlier series on the history of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge.

However, the death of Selma at the start of the series and the impact of that loss on all who knew her made me delay asking for that input. Now that a bit of time has passed, and the initial grieving with it, I thought it was a good time to make that request. Not surprisingly the museum staff and volunteers that I asked to contribute their thoughts were eager to do so. Here is that input:

First, here is input from the Director of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, Mary Ann Damos. It is she who finds it hers to follow in the footsteps of a giant, but a giant with whom she developed a special relationship. As you read the last paragraph of what Mary Ann has to say, know that Selma's mentoring has paid off in spades.

Mary Ann said, "Selma was a dear friend, valued colleague and mentor. I first met Selma in 1996 when I applied for a job at the museum as Director of Education. I immediately felt a connection with Selma as we expressed our interests and professional goals. We especially felt a bond concerning the importance of children and the arts and the value of the arts to have a positive impact on the life of a child. She was a great boss who allowed me to pursue projects that held meaning and interest for me and was always encouraging. She took a true interest in all of her employees, viewing each as a special individual, valuing their unique talents and was always interested and sympathetic to whatever was going on in their lives."

"Selma had a great deal of determination especially where the museum was concerned and worked tirelessly to build it up. She was always willing to do whatever was needed to make it a success. The museum was a passion that only grew with time. She loved the Children's Museum and all it stands for, respect for children, family learning, non-traditional interdisciplinary education, the arts, community involvement and diversity.

"She is an example of a life well lived with passion, compassion, love and a wonderful, strong sense of mission to better the lives of children. She will always be remembered for giving Oak Ridge the gift of a children's museum which will, because of her vision, continue to touch the lives of families and children throughout East Tennessee.

Mary Ann Damos

Next is input from Carroll Welch. Read it carefully and slowly absorbing the depth contained in the words. Her short concise treatment astounds me. The first sentence grabbed me and the rest of the paragraph shows obvious admiration born of Selma's personal impact on Carroll.

Carroll said, "Selma Shapiro could give not solely of her wisdom, but rather lead you to the threshold of your own mind. She was an exceptional role model. Through her strong leadership, she offered stability, particularly for disadvantaged children, providing a safe haven for them from their troubled homes. She lived a life of compassion, fairness and meaning. She created an incredible community institution that has impacted not only my life, but countless others. Her spirit remains with us always."

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Carroll Welch

Finally, here are Margaret Allard's thoughts. Margaret was the person who called me to let me know of Selma's passing and to encourage me to continue with the series as the family wanted that. She also provided substantial research support on all the articles I have published about the museum. She has searched out many photographs and edited them to make them useable. I want to thank her for all her hard work at my request.

As you read what Margaret has written, think of the tremendous influence Selma had on Margaret. She watched closely what Selma did.

Margaret said, "It is difficult to imagine a Children's Museum of Oak Ridge without Selma Shapiro. For over thirty years, as Director, she was the driving force that brought it from grass-roots beginnings to national prominence. Even after her retirement she remained as a Board member and volunteer."

"Selma has been honored many times by her peers and by the community. She received national acclaim and brought the name of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge recognition and respect.

"I have known Selma for about twenty-five years and I have so many memories of her. I first met Selma when I came to the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge for the first time with my one-year old son. The museum was very different back then; Selma's office was right behind the receptionist's desk. From there she could hear people coming and going and she could monitor the activities of the museum. Selma would pop out of her office to say hello whenever we came. I quickly discovered that Selma was a remarkable person with a remarkable memory; she remembered everything I told her, and seemingly everything else! Not only did she remember, but she also really cared. During the years I volunteered for Selma (starting in 1989) I would often rely on her good memory for people's names, events, Oak Ridge history, and museum history. I've lost that resource now along with the cherished friendship.

"Over the 31 years that Selma was the director of CMOR she had to persevere through good times and bad. She never had an assistant or secretary. She had a business background; she did her own typing (extremely fast) and Viola Ergen kept the financial books straight. Selma was a no-frills, no-nonsense director; she never tried to promote herself in any way; all her time and efforts were directed toward the betterment of CMOR and the lives of children. She always kept in mind the humble grass-roots beginnings and carefully watched over the growth of the museum, not overspending, but economizing on everything to keep the dream going. She went to Rotary every Thursday but the rest of the week she brought in a sandwich and a cup of water for lunch, usually eating at her desk while working on something else. Through hard work, integrity and dedication she made a lasting contribution to the community and especially to the children.

"Selma truly loved the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. She fought for it with all her energy when it was in financial trouble. She worked very hard and she would do whatever it took to keep the museum afloat. She often put off taking her own paycheck when other bills had to be paid. At the end of the day it would often be Selma who would go through the museum straightening up and locking doors.

"The thing that really stands out in my memories of Selma is her determined advocacy of all children, especially the less advantaged neighborhood children. When school got out in the afternoons her office was often full of kids; the artwork they did for her decorated her walls. She looked after their welfare,

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often fed them and drove them home at closing time if they didn't have a ride. She included them in museum camps and functions. She was patient with them and forgiving. I only hope they look back on their time with her and really appreciate what she did for them.

"Selma was always so appreciative of the many people who jumped in to help her with the Museum. At her annual volunteer appreciation luncheons she would get up and call out each name and describe in detail what each volunteer was doing for the Museum and how long they had been there.

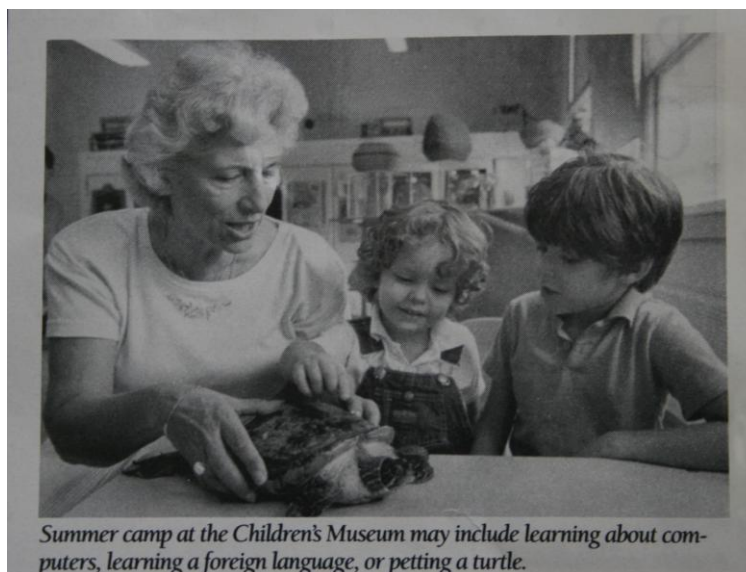
"Selma loved telling us all about her family: her children, grandchildren and lately, even great-grandchildren. Before she started working at the museum, she was thoroughly involved with her own children; she loved bringing up her four children in Oak Ridge. She told how she came to Oak Ridge to join her husband, Ted at the end of the war, fell in love with the City, and decided to never leave. I also loved the stories she told about her family back in Massachusetts and her childhood there.

"I think I could fill a whole book with all the funny, not funny, wild, exasperating, difficult, interesting and fun experiences Selma and I shared over the years. Everyone who works at CMOR knows there's never a dull moment!

"Selma will have two legacies: her wonderful family and the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. We all miss her very much.

Margaret Allard

There you have it, admiration from loyal friends and not just employees or workers. I appreciate each of their contributions. As we close this series on Selma Shapiro, we see a fuller picture of her because of the oral history, but maybe we have an even more insightful view of her life through the shared thoughts of these close associates. Thanks to you all for sharing and *Remembering Selma Shapiro*!



One of my favorite images of Selma – with children and helping them learn! I am told the children are Nathan and Nicholas Leiby and further told that Nathan now wears his hair short and Nick shaves his head. The image was taken in 1989 and appeared in an Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce publication.