

Schellberg was pioneer for women

A life remembered

By Robb Murray, Free Press Staff Writer [published in The Free Press, Mankato]



Ruth Schellberg was unwavering in both her belief in equal access to athletic opportunities and in her love of canoeing.

MANKATO — In her later years, Ruth Schellberg would still come to sporting events at Minnesota State University. But Schellberg, who came to work at the institution back when it was called Mankato State Teachers College, only went to the women's events.

To those who knew her, though, that should come as no surprise. Schellberg, the former director of Mankato State College's women's physical education department, died Wednesday at age 92. She had a reputation as a tireless champion for the rights of women and will be remembered as the woman who, more than anyone, helped pave the way for women to participate in sports at MSU.

But Schellberg, one friend says, didn't start her MSU career as an equal rights advocate. And when she became one, her fight wasn't always a pleasant one.

"She was very supportive of women, and when I first came there, she did a lot of things in the outdoors, but that was primarily to not interfere with the men," said Georgene Brock, who was hired by Schellberg in the 1960s. "Ruth grew up with the idea that women couldn't compete in athletics."

It was a few research papers written by female students that changed Schellberg's mind. Those students questioned why women didn't have equal access to athletic opportunities, and soon Schellberg began to agree.

She pushed the MSU administration for access. She got it. But Brock said the battles fought along the way left Schellberg with a few scars and some bad feelings, feelings that kept her away from men's athletics.

Said Brock, "It took a lot of strength as an individual to endure."

Schellberg left MSU in the 1970s. During the 1980s, when buildings were getting names, she got hers. The university's Schellberg gym was named after her.

Her other legacy could be in the number of young people she introduced to the outdoors.

Schellberg was born and raised in Nebraska. Her love of canoeing led friends to tell her to move to Minnesota. After doing so she began volunteering for the Camp Fire organization and took more than 100 trips to the Boundary Waters Canoe Wilderness Area, many of which gave young girls their first taste of the outdoors.

Each canoe trip instilled a sense of accomplishment in the people she brought along with her, and also earned her a few more friends.

In a Free Press article published in 1998, Schellberg said, "It gives you a lot of friends. They never forget you if they've been on a canoe trip with you."