

The death of a legend in the Richmond deaf community



FAMILY PHOTO

Newlyweds Edward and Harriett Ropelewski in the 1940s.



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By BILL LOHMANN Richmond Times-Dispatch

Harriett Wickline Ropelewski did some of her best work without saying a word.

But it was her ability to say words that made her a remarkable advocate for those unable to hear and, in a sense, to bridge two worlds.

Harriett, who died last month at age 93, was an interpreter for the deaf her entire life, but that doesn't quite give you the true, full measure of what she did. It wasn't so much a job – and for most of her years, she was purely a volunteer – but her mission in life.

“It was her calling,” said daughter Cecky Ropelewski. “She felt that was her duty: to help deaf people. She knew what that community was like because she grew up in it.”

Born in Richmond, Harriett could hear, but her parents couldn't and, in fact, deafness ran on her father's side of the family. As a child, sign language became her first language and English her second. At home, she communicated with her parents by signing, and she would serve as their interpreter in the hearing world. She was so good at it that her parents would “loan her out” to their deaf friends to accompany them to doctors' appointments, to help them purchase cars, buy homes, open a bank account, appear in court.

Anything that required speaking, Harriett became their voice. She would not just interpret the words; she would help them understand.

She did that for years, truly out of the goodness of her heart. They needed help. She gave it. It was that simple.

She was in her 50s and had been interpreting for decades before the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing came into existence and she became certified and actually started to be paid for her work.

“She devoted her life to the deaf community where she was legend,” said Ronald L. Lanier, VDDHH director. “She had an impact on ... generations of individuals. Everybody knew her within the deaf community. When she was present (at an event), deaf people knew this event was going to be accessible for them. Whenever Harriett was there, they knew where to look, where they were going to get their information.”

Her one-on-one work left indelible impressions on people like Joyce Noel.

Noel grew up deaf in Southwest Virginia, where she never had an interpreter. It wasn't until she moved to Richmond in her 20s that she had the opportunity to work with an interpreter: Harriett.

“I used her for going to doctors' appointments, she came with me to the hospital for the birth of my child, actually both my babies,” Noel said. “She was a wonderful woman. She was kind of like a mother. She would comfort me when I was sick. She would stay with me. She was just great.”

I spoke to Noel through the magic of a video phone, the sort of modern technological advance that could only have been envisioned in the wildest imaginations when Harriett was growing up. I called Noel from my office phone, and my call was immediately directed to an interpreter on a third line. Noel and the interpreter were connected through videophones, so they could see each other. I would ask a question, the interpreter would sign it to Noel, who would sign back her reply, and then the interpreter would give voice to what she said.

Pretty amazing.

“Very profound” is how Noel described Harriett's impact on her life.

For years, Harriett interpreted Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Henrico County, not far from the Lakeside home where she and husband, Edward, raised six children. She made worship accessible to many, and it was only right that her funeral at the church was signed to her many deaf friends who came to say goodbye.

In later years, Harriett lost a leg and had to recuperate at home, but that didn't stop her interpreting work: People came to her house seeking her help. When she felt better, she had her husband drive her all over the area to assignments. He would go sightseeing while she worked, their daughter Cecky said, and then return to pick her up when she was done.

Eventually, though, Harriett's eyesight faded, and she didn't believe she could see well enough to interpret accurately, so she retired. She was in her 80s.

Said friend and fellow interpreter Ellen Trimble, "When interpreters would gather and Harriett's name was mentioned, we would all agree that someday she would be 'Saint Harriett.'"

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