

# Navy wife from Pennsylvania found her true home in Newport

By William C. Kashatus

Since the Colonial era, when Newport's seafarers returned from the West Indies with a pineapple to signal a safe voyage, the tropical fruit has served as the town's official symbol of hospitality, welcoming transplants like my aunt, Helen Femino, who recently passed away at age 90. Although a native Pennsylvanian, Helen, like many Navy wives, considered Aquidneck Island her home. It's where she spent the happiest years of her life, where she made her closest friends, and where she left her heart when she returned to the Keystone State in the final year of her life.

Helen Markiewicz was born in 1922, in a small Pennsylvania coal mining town. During the Great Depression, her parents had 11 children to feed. Not wanting to be a burden, she left at age 16 for Brooklyn, where she worked as an au pair, and later, as a Bell Telephone operator. Helen, a shy, sensitive girl, missed her family dearly but never complained. Instead, she invested herself in work, eventually becoming a supervisor.

In the 1960s, she met Dick Femino, a chief petty officer from Providence. Dick was a colorful character who fell hard and fast for Helen. Taken by her stunning red hair and sweet personality, he kept after her until she finally agreed to marry him in 1965.

The newlyweds complemented each other perfectly. She was shy, refined and introspective, while he was outgoing, spontaneous and rough around the edges. They also shared a strong sense of pride, an impressive work ethic and a willingness to sacrifice. Most important, they loved each other deeply and without condition.

During the next decade, the Navy assigned Dick to various posts in Western Europe, including a two-year stint in Roda, Spain. When they returned stateside, Dick finagled an assignment at Newport, where they settled after his retirement in 1974. The couple opened "Distinctive Woodcraft," an antique



Contributed photo

Helen and Dick Femino pose for a photograph in 1974, on the eve of Dick's retirement from the Navy.

furniture restoration business. Some customers were old-timers who hung around the showroom because they were sweet on Helen, but most were Navy families. Other patrons were affluent residents of Ocean Drive, including Janet Auchincloss, mother of first lady Jacqueline Kennedy, who considered my aunt a "person of class." In fact, Helen treated everyone the same, regardless of background.

Memberships in the American Legion, Lions Club and Kiwanis enabled the couple to establish a circle of friends who became closer than family itself. Helen's greatest joy was the Island Senior Chorus in Portsmouth. Initially, she didn't have the confidence to join. But friends gently encouraged her. Then, on a dare, Dick, who couldn't carry a tune to save his life, said he'd join the chorus

if she did. Risking embarrassment, Helen agreed and the couple became regulars.

Although their social calendar was packed, they always made time for family, who were welcomed guests at their Middletown home. When I attended Brown University, Helen and Dick became surrogate parents. As a result, I spent more time in Newport than Providence, barely managing to complete a master's degree in history before returning to Philadelphia in 1984. By that time, I knew my aunt would never leave Aquidneck Island. To appease her brothers and sisters, the couple purchased a vacation home on a lake in northeastern Pennsylvania. Still, it was clear that Newport had become Helen's real home.

When Dick passed away in 2001, Helen decided to remain in their Middletown house. Surrounded by friends, she continued to sing in the chorus and occasionally indulge at Newport's "den of iniquity," the Newport Grand casino. Chronic arthritis and a bad hip made it difficult to live alone, though her closest friend, Barbara, and her daughters cared for her on a daily basis. When she finally did return to Pennsylvania earlier this year, Helen was stricken with cancer. But she faced the illness with dignity and courage until she passed away on Dec. 19.

Sometimes we forget the specialness of our communities. Although Newport's rich history distinguishes it from most towns in the country, it's really the people who live there that define its uniqueness. My aunt considered Aquidneck Island "home" because of the friends who embraced her in sickness and in health. She loved them just as much, if not more, than family. Helen was fond of saying, "Newport may be located in the smallest state of the union, but it has the biggest heart in the world." This Philadelphian agrees wholeheartedly.

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