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Baraboo recycling pioneer Zantow dies

Annie Getsinger | News Republic
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Milly Zantow takes a break from her sorting duties at E-Z Recycling. The Baraboo environmentalist and volunteer last week at the age of 91.

Contributed by Jim Stevens

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When Milly Zantow saw a need, she worked to fill it. The area grandmother, perhaps best known locally for her work as a recycling pioneer, died this week at the age of 91.

Her loved ones gathered to prepare to celebrate her life and contributions as an environmentalist, volunteer and friend to many.

“She took her citizenship of the world very seriously,” said son Jim Stevens.

Born in rural Oklahoma in 1923, Zantow learned early on about making do and lending a helping hand to others.

“Her father basically taught her to use, or wear out or recycle everything possible,” said Stevens.

Helping family members in times of illness and need, a civilian assignment at Langley Field during World War II, a volunteer administrator role at the International Crane Foundation and numerous other endeavors highlight a life lived in joyful service.

In the late 1970s, a two-week tour of Japan through the Crane Foundation served as the inspiration for the project that would cement Zantow’s environmental legacy.

During her trip, she took note of the Japanese system for recycling waste.

Back in Sauk County, with her travels still fresh in her mind, Zantow visited the Sauk County Landfill near Reedsburg, contemplating the sight with her notebook in hand, said daughter-in-law Cheryl Zantow.

“It was a 20-year landfill that was closing five years early because there was too much stuff in it,” said son Todd Zantow.

Milly Zantow saw that much of the waste going into the landfill was potentially recyclable, and a good deal of the garbage was plastic.

She described her experience in former University of Wisconsin-Madison student Liese Dart’s short film “Plastics One Through Seven.”

“I went out and sat on the landfill and watched everything that came in that day,” Zantow said in the film, her light blue eyes sparkling as she remembered the start of her project.

Zantow started to look into bringing plastics recycling programs to the area, asking local officials about the possibility and plastics companies whether they repurposed the flawed products that came off their production lines. When she discovered that milk jugs could be melted down and processed anew, she knew the recycling program was a possibility.

After laying the groundwork with lawmakers, communities and industry, in 1979, Zantow co-founded the first complete recycling service in Sauk County, E-Z Recycling, which handled more than 200,000 pounds of material in its first full year.

Zantow and co-founder Jenny Ehl cashed in their life insurance policies to buy a commercial plastics grinder.

They worked with companies to create some of the very first markets in the U.S. for post-consumer plastics, and to establish cooperation among stakeholders.

The work was hard, and the hours were long. Items had to be sorted, cleaned and freed of labels and other materials so the companies could take them.

“She didn’t have the money to hire help,” Zantow’s husband, Woody, remembered, so she enlisted other area women to volunteer, letting them collect coupons from the items they were sorting as a reward.

The volunteer crews worked six or seven days a week, endlessly sorting, cleaning and stringing plastic bottles and jugs, and crushing cans and glass by hand.

In the community’s trash, Zantow saw the potential for culverts and pipe for drainage fields and other products.

“It didn’t take off and fly by itself,” Stevens said of the operation. “... Meanwhile she’s putting in all these hours for nothing.”

“She got community after community involved,” said Todd Zantow.

Lodi, Baraboo, Sauk City, Prairie du Sac, Mazomanie, Loganville and Reedsburg came on board, hauling recyclables to the facility for free instead of paying fees to dump them in the landfill.

“They saved tons and tons of material from the landfill,” Todd Zantow said.

Local, state and national officials took notice. Milly Zantow lobbied companies to make products with labels that were easier to remove, co-authored a policy paper that was adopted by the Environmental Protection Agency and was instrumental in creating a way of labeling different types of plastic more clearly for sorting — the now ubiquitous numbered triangular emblem.

Zantow received awards and recognition for her contributions, but Stevens said his mom was always quick to share the credit. She valued the volunteers who cared enough about the project to help it succeed, the schoolchildren who opened their classrooms and their minds to the new concept and the communities that took to the program.

“There were a lot of people that took it to heart and wanted to make it work,” he said.

Recycling was just one of many ways Zantow touched her community. In 1974 the family took in and sponsored three Vietnamese refugees, said Woody Zantow. Milly Zantow served as a mobile meals, Habitat for Humanity and hospital volunteer, worked with youth mentorship programs and was a founding member of the International Crane Foundation.

ICF co-founder George Archibald had enlisted Zantow’s help in typing his thesis and later recruited her to serve as volunteer administrator, her husband said. Zantow helped care for the young facility and its animals on many occasions.

Stevens said his mom often went to extraordinary lengths to get the job done.

“She had a history of working her way up the phone tree,” he said.

Once, while Archibald was abroad and having some difficulties reentering the U.S. due to a visa issue, Zantow made a few calls on his behalf.

“She tried the representatives and went up and up and up until, eventually, she got to Henry Kissinger to get George back into the country,” Stevens said.

It wasn’t the only time she called the secretary of state, Cheryl Zantow said with a chuckle.

“Mom was ever full of surprises, for me at least,” Todd Zantow said.

He remembered a trip to Arizona when the family went to the Titan Missile Museum. Milly Zantow skipped out on the tour of the missile silo.

“Mom didn’t have any interest in going down in it because, apparently, she had typed up so many of the manuals she didn’t care about it,” he said with a laugh.

Turns out Zantow had worked with quite a few important figures during her Langley days.

“I still have a sneaking suspicion there’s more that she never told us,” Stevens said.

The grandmotherly woman, who wore blue coveralls to sort cans, bottles and newspaper, lived her life with the simple goal of doing good for others.

“Always do all the good you can for all the people you can in all the ways you can just as long as you can,” said Todd Zantow, quoting a piece of advice his mom had received from her older sister Edith.

“She took care of family, but family wasn’t just nuclear,” said Stevens. “It was extremely extended. People became family ... She was a beautiful person.”

“I’ll miss the twinkle in her eye,” said Cheryl Zantow.

Zantow's memorial service will be held at 11 a.m. on Tuesday, Aug. 12 at Hooverson Funeral Home in Sauk City. A visitation will be held from 4 p.m. until 7 p.m. on Monday, Aug. 11, 2014, at the funeral home, and one hour prior to the service on Tuesday.

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