

'One of the most important Newfoundlanders': Melba Rabinowitz adopted the province with a passion and made tremendous contributions to early childhood education ^[1]

Originally from Tennessee, after arriving in the mid-1970s the late educator was a stalwart advocate and champion for parents, children and families

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EXCERPTS

ST. JOHN'S, N.L. — Speaking about his late wife Melba, Mike Rabinowitz repeatedly shifts the focus from their story as a couple to her achievements.

"She was an amazing woman. Yeah, she was tough and determined and independent," Mike said. "She was certainly one of the most important Newfoundlanders."

Melba died at age 81 on Nov. 7, 2021, after a prolonged neuro-degenerative disease called progressive supranuclear palsy. A celebration of her life will be held on May 15.

"The last week she couldn't swallow. I mean, the whole thing was so stressful," he said of the five-year ordeal of her debilitating illness.

They met when he was in graduate school at the University of Iowa and she was a new faculty member in early childhood education. There was research work in child learning in common and also social events.

"She hung out with the graduate students because we were her age," Mike recalled.

He didn't dance.

"She was quite the dancer. I was holding her bag when we had all those dances," he said.

He got mono the summer of graduate school and Melba looked after him.

"When I finished and got my PhD, she was going to leave and go to Cornell (University) and then we just decided to get married," he said.

Long marriage

He took his first job at the University of Washington in Seattle and they were married by a justice of the peace, a union that endured for 60 years.

Melba, said Mike, was immediately hired at the community college. With two children in tow, they relocated to New Orleans, where their third child joined the family and Melba became well known in her field, writing ground-breaking early childhood education curriculum.

The couple moved to Newfoundland and Labrador when Mike took a position in the psychology department of Memorial University. He had grown up in the Bronx, N.Y. and she in Tennessee.

They were living in New Orleans when they made the decision they wanted to raise their three children in a safer place than the U.S.

But while in New Orleans, Melba wrote about her son's baby cavities and brought awareness to the causes of them — such as juice — information he said was feted by the U.S. dental association.

They arrived at Memorial University on July 1, 1975, a gorgeous day that Mike remembers well, as people were stretched out on blankets to catch the sun around campus.

Farm founders

After living in St. John's for a while, the couple moved to Portugal Cove-St. Philip's and went on to establish The Organic Farm, one of the pioneering organic operations in the province and still a popular metro source of organic produce.

But they began by bartering to the former Mary Janes co-operative store on Duckworth Street, trading their farm produce for things like

coffee and cheese.

They hired teenage friends of their children to work on the farm and also hosted travellers in exchange for room and board.

“God, we had an interesting life,” said Mike, who educated himself in farming — Melba had a family history in farming — and became an expert. “A couple of babies were born there ... It was really fun.”

Mike said Melba’s remarkable achievements trace back to when she was a college student.

She was once head of the Tennessee Home Economics Association and sat at the headtable at a dinner with Eleanor Roosevelt, one of the most famous and influential U.S. first ladies.

After making N.L. home, Melba made it her mission to advocate for improved early childhood and family services for vulnerable families and children, introducing innovative ideas based on the best available research, notes her biography for her investiture into the Order of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Initially, she worked as the co-ordinator of the early childhood certificate program with Memorial University Extension Services.

In 1979, she organized the first, province-wide, formal training for childcare staff, the bio notes.

Childcare advocacy

Around the early 1990s, she fought proposed provincial cuts to the Daybreak Parent Child Centre — leading a movement to save the non-profit, of which she is regarded as the founder.

Information was being leaked to the group’s members from all political parties, recalled Patsy Gosse and Lynn MacCannell.

“We were into the Confederation Building every night,” Gosse said.

“People from all over North America knew Melba and wrote letters,” MacCannell said.

Daybreak over the decades has offered a range of cutting-edge parenting and child development programs and services including a healthy baby club to ensure nutrition for vulnerable expectant moms, and services for children with autism. From the time it opened its doors in the 1970s, it recognized the importance of working with the whole family on their complex, social needs, the history on its website notes.

“She was ready to drop anything at any time to help parents and families,” MacCannell said of Melba’s work there.

Jack Strawbridge, a retired MUN professor who now lives in B.C., worked in the same department as Mike and was also on the board of the non-profit for years.

“Melba was enthusiastic about everything she did and she enthused others,” Strawbridge said.

“Her voice was always in the ear of politicians and decision-makers.”

Happy host

He also noted that she adored Newfoundland music — thumping the ugly stick on the floor to the rhythm — and loved having impromptu dinner parties at her home.

“She was never happier than having a gang over to her house for dinner,” Strawbridge said.

“There would be people from all walks of life.”

Gosse was working at the Rob Roy bar on George Street, a single parent trying to feed her child, who she enrolled at Daybreak. From her involvement as a parent, Gosse then worked and volunteered at Daybreak and at one point ran her own daycare centre, all career moves inspired by Melba, who motivated people to take on new challenges.

“She changed many lives,” Gosse said. “Melba was just infectious.”

When she spent time with Melba in the final stages of her illness, she said her mentor would light up right to the end as Gosse described her current volunteer work.

Sound guidance

Melba and Mike’s oldest child, Toby — her brothers are Louis and Avrom — said her mother was always helping her make life choices.

“I will miss her guidance,” she said.

She noted Melba’s longtime involvement in the Newfoundland Writers’ Guild, and that she was a stellar cook — teaching her how to make such things as gumbo and vegan dishes like squash soup.

Mike raved about her cooking as well.

“Melba was the second-best cook I ever knew,” he said, adding his grandmother was the best.

“It was mind boggling. She could do everything. She made the world’s best lemon meringue pie.”

The celebration of life will be held at MUN Signal Hill Campus on Sunday, May 15, beginning at 1:30 p.m.

Some of the speakers will appear via online video conference from Arizona, B.C., California, Louisiana, Tennessee, Toronto and the east coast of the U.S. and Canada.

Region: Newfoundland ^[3]

Tags: early childhood education and care ^[4]

children's advocate ^[5]

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