

Helen Morrison's Bio for AAUW, 2/2014

Helen Morrison was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota and graduated in library science from the University of Minnesota; then served as reference librarian there.

In 1943, she married her high school sweetheart, Ken Morrison. She became a life-long supporter of her husband's work as editor of Audubon Magazine in New York and then as director of Bok Tower Gardens when they moved to Florida in 1956. As a couple, Ken and Helen were a powerful team dedicated to family, community, conservation, public service and the love of laughter, song and life! Helen has 4 children and 2 grand children, all living close by.

In the 1950s, a group of women began meeting at the Lake Wales Library. Their goal became helping Lake Wales area high school students by enabling them to continue their education. These women committed themselves to raising funds to create a scholarship program that would provide small loans to qualified students. This was the beginning of the group, Operation Bookstrap and they adopted the slogan, "Give a Dollar, Raise a Scholar!"

Helen Morrison was a founding board member and Elizabeth Craig, another AAUW member, was the first chairman. They held bake sales to raise money; and even ran Papa Hoffman's Downtown Bakery when he got sick, keeping his business operating and providing some of the funding for Operation Bookstrap. As students paid back their loans, this also helped re-fill the scholarship fund. During 30 years of its innovative existence, Operation Bookstrap empowered 600 students to further their educations. Some would become teachers, dental hygienists, lawyers, while others developed trade skills that would serve them for life.

Some of the women from Operation Bookstrap and the Lake Wales Men's Sounding Board began lunch discussion meetings and from that the Florida Bi-Partisans Civic Affairs group was born. It still is a public interest group that has actively worked for good government, education, and stewardship of our resources since 1960. Helen and Ken Morrison have been recognized as founding members "with an unparalleled record of longevity of public service, wisdom, and leadership that inspires others to "join and do". The organization was pro-active at state-wide public hearings regarding clean water and regulations; dedicated to contacting legislators and keeping informed on issues and continues with public forums today.

Helen Morrison's love of children and her belief in instilling in them knowledge and appreciation of the natural world around them resulted in her program for conservation education in elementary schools. For 10 years (from 1969 – 1979), she taught in Polk County elementary schools, developing one of the first pilot conservation programs, state-funded, that would expose countless school children to the wonders of the

outdoors. Helen knew that young children learning about and enjoying nature would foster adults that respect and provide stewardship for our planet.

For 10 years (1969 – 1979), she taught in Polk County Schools, developing a unique pilot program, government-funded, that exposed countless school children to the wonders of the outdoors. Each week she went to 5 or 6 schools, teaching with plants and animals in the classroom. The lives of many an injured or orphaned animal were restored at the Morrison household, then shared by Helen with school children, and released back into the wild or placed in a protected habitat. Now 40 years later, former students still come to Helen & say how much she influenced their lives, some going into wildlife rehab; others becoming environmental planners; and many taking time to be involved in organizations that protect our water and natural resources.

Another educational program Helen helped develop was the Outdoor Classroom within the Scrub Plum Preserve in Babson Park. This 25-acre preserve is maintained as a conservation easement agreement with Green Horizon Land Trust and Babson Park Community Church, its owner. The preserve now features 3 nature trails & provides an Outdoor Classroom where field trip guides from The Nature Conservancy, Ridge Audubon Society, the Forestry Department, the Florida Park Service and Webber College volunteer to teach elementary students (and their teachers.) Here in this outdoor venue, they learn the inter-connectedness of their community and nature.....all tied in to their school curriculum!

Due to her long-term, absolute moral dedication to education and conservation causes, Helen has imprinted & inspired many of our youth to carry on in her footsteps, and she continues today to gently but persistently coax others, to help them believe they can make a difference, that each of us has the unique ability to make the world a better place, for having lived in it! .

She has left her fingerprints on numerous environmental causes from the Cross Florida Barge Canal in North Florida to the Everglades. Well- known for her attention to details in championing causes & facing political issues, Helen developed a flair for monitoring regulatory governmental agencies, researching their reports and data, and then with a gracious tenacity reminding officials that they must act in the best interests for the health of the environment and for people's health, knowing how inter-connected they are.

Locally in Polk County she realized early on the importance of protecting our water quality and the Floridan Aquifer. She has worked tirelessly to protect the Green Swamp, still encouraging others to realize the importance of this water recharge area that is the headwaters of 5 Florida rivers and is threatened today by development and misuse.

When asked what issue today stands out as most important, she will tell you:
“Water! We must conserve it and take care of it!”

Helen is a founding member of the Defenders of Crooked Lake, established 44 years ago. Crooked Lake is Polk County's only designated Outstanding Florida Water and Helen has worked diligently to keep it that way.

Believing in the importance of protecting Florida lands for people's enjoyment, she took an active role in the establishment of Tiger Creek Preserve, Kissimmee State Park, and the Ridge Audubon Nature Center (which just celebrated its 50 year anniversary.)

We are blessed with the longevity and perseverance of Helen Morrison's dedication to education and conservation on the Ridge. Her compassion for all creatures great and small (including people) has been on-going. Her integrity, her joie de vivre and her undying optimistic view of the world have led her to be one of the great women making history on the ridge!

2 questions:

1. The most rewarding thing in your career:

Teaching conservation education to children and seeing results that help our world

2. the most challenging thing in your career:

Working on political issues & working with legislators and regulatory agencies; being called “little woman” by politicians and being ignored at hearings by officials or not being acknowledged; being treated with less dignity or respect than was acceptable; yet trying to respond with grace and dignity & for important causes made it possible to endure;
threatened with a “slap suit”;