

Hildegard Marsden

Throughout her career as University of Waterloo's Dean of Women, Hildegard Marsden championed women who had interrupted their education or careers to care for their children.



Marsden knew better than anyone the determination it took to finish a degree for women of her generation. It would be eighteen years before she could complete her own Bachelor of Arts, a degree that was interrupted by the Second World War and later, the demands of family.

In 1941 a 21-year-old Hildegard von Boetticher was forced to leave a Virginia university. As Germans, her family was interned in a hotel before being deported back to Germany.

Upon arriving in Berlin, Hildegard worked in a censoring office while the city was being heavily bombed. When the war was over, she worked as a liaison between the new German government and the Americans and British. While working in the Leipzig mayor's office she met British officer Horace Marsden. She married Marsden and in short order they had three children.

The young Marsden family immigrated to Canada in 1951 and soon settled in Waterloo. During the 1950s, Marsden took courses at Waterloo College while caring for her three children, Camilla, William and Elizabeth. She was the first woman in Waterloo Region to return to university as a mature student with children.

On June 8, 1959 she graduated with her BA from the Virginian university she had first attended so many years before.

She went on to graduate with an MA from the University of Waterloo and was appointed lecturer in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages in 1965. During the mid-1960s, Marsden also served as the assistant to the Dean of Women and was appointed to the job in 1967.

When she got the job, Marsden told the local newspaper:

“A woman who returns to work at 40 still has much to offer the community. It is unfortunate if a university education comes to a dead end in the kitchen sink.” Marsden saw her role as empowering women on campus. “I see my job as creating an intellectual atmosphere for women at the university. I want them to stop leaning and learn to cope, to develop more independence and backbone.”

Marsden promoted a variety of initiatives including women's athletics, housing for women and child care facilities on campus. She established the Athena Award for outstanding female athletes and was inducted into the University of Waterloo's Athletic Hall of Fame in 1984.

Marsden died on April 24, 1988 after retiring only three years before, however, her legacy lives on in the Hildegard Marsden Co-operative Day Care Centre which was opened in 1989. The university has a capital fund in Marsden's name to raise money for a more permanent home for the facility which currently operates out of portables.

During the dedication ceremony, friend Peter Woolstencroft said:

“My hope is that those charged with the care of the children will reflect the qualities that capture her generosity, her love of life, her immense curiosity, and her courage . . . My hope is that the daycare will resonate with Hildegard Marsden's spirit.”

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