

DONNA SCHEEDER: 1947-2022

Librarian And Community Activist

by Andrew Lightman

Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon'em," wrote the Bard in Twelfth Night. Donna Willis Scheeder was one such woman.

An award-winning librarian, Scheeder made her mark on the Congressional Research Service and Library of Congress. However, it was in her own beloved Capitol Hill where her mettle was truly tested as she helmed the fractious community of Eastern Market stakeholders through the building's reconstruction in the wake of the devastating 2007 fire.

Scheeder died peacefully of cancer at her Capitol Hill home on March 7, 2022 at the age of 74.

Early Life

Donna Wills Scheeder was born on Nov. 8, 1947 in Buffalo, New York, the only child of Detta Gorman and Joseph Morris Wills. Scheeder attended Mount St. Joseph Academy in her hometown. She was a high-school debate champion, attending national competitions as far away as Manhattan.

Aided by the connections of a high school mentor, Scheeder was one of only 25 women admitted in her undergraduate class at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. College brought her to the District of Columbia, which served as home for the remainder of her life.

Scheeder recalled her first visit to Capitol Hill as a college freshman in an interview with Stephanie Deutsch for the Ruth Ann Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project (www.capitolhistory.org):

"(T)he first time I went to Capitol Hill was to sign Christmas cards and address them in my Congressman's Office, which was in the Longworth building. And, I thought at the time, this is the most exciting thing. Because I have always loved politics..."

Opportunities for women in the Foreign Service

were very limited in 1969. So, upon graduation, she pursued a career working for the US Congress, securing a job as a GS-5 library assistant at the Congressional Research Service (CRS).

In 1971, her then husband Louis Scheeder was hired as Director at the Folger Theater Group,

started there were no computers... a Member would say I need a list of all the bills in the Congress on health insurance and a summary of them... So you would get a shopping cart and a lot of bookmarks and you would roll over to the shelf and you'd get the index out, and you would stand there and put the bookmarks in the book. Then you would take it to the world's slowest photocopy machine... crack open the spine and press it down... it would take hours..."

As CRS moved to the cutting edge of information retrieval, computers arrived, initially the size of small closets, recalled Scheeder. During this technological transformation, Scheeder served as Director of CRS and later as the Director of Law Services at the Library of Congress. She ended her career as CRS's Chief Information Officer, retiring in 2015.

An expert on news information services, Scheeder proved influential not only within the halls of Congress, but also nationally and internationally. She was an active member of the Special Libraries Association for more than 45 years, serving a term as president and

earning election to the organization's Hall of Fame. Scheeder also served for two years (2015-17) as the president of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), traveling extensively internationally. She continued to sit on the IFLA governing board right up to the time of her death.

Democratic Politics

It was Capitol Hill Democratic activist Ted Gay, who initially corralled Scheeder into District politics in the heady days after the advent of District Home Rule. Gay knew the Scheeders from the Folger. At his encouragement, she attended the organizational meetings of the Ward 6 Democrats in the early 1970s. Casting her first vote for Betty Anne Kane in a



The Capitol Hill Community Foundation recognizes Donna Scheeder (center) as a 2009 Community Achievement Awardee. Photo: Andrew Lightman

The Scheeders moved to Capitol Hill, settling in an apartment at 12 Third Street SE. Eventually, they purchased a home on North Carolina Avenue SE across from Brent Elementary School, where she resided until her death.

Internationally Recognized Librarian

Scheeder would serve the US Congress for more than three decades in a career at both the Library of Congress and CRS. It was a period of explosive expansion and technological changes that transformed these organizations into sophisticated legislative research operations.

Recalling her early days at CRS, Scheeder said, "Basically, we answered a lot of requests when I first

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Image: Detail, Statue of Freedom by Thomas Crawford, United States Capitol dome. In preparation for the garden party, she is fully waxed, hoisted and up to date on her allergy shots. Photograph by Jack E. Boucher.

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School Board race, the only District elected body before the advent of Home Rule, Scheeder won election later as a Democratic precinct captain with the aid of happy hour friends at the Hawk'n'Dove. From that moment, she was hooked on District politics.

Scheeder threw herself into local Democratic races, working phone banks, leafleting, standing at the voting precincts and raising money. She volunteered for the political campaigns of Ward 6 Councilmember Betty Anne Kane (D), Ward 6 Councilmember Sharon Ambrose (D) and Ward 6 and later At-Large Councilmember Harold Brazil (D), Ward 6 Councilmember Tommy Wells (D) and Ward 6 Councilmember Charles Allen (D). She worked to elect DC Mayors Marion Barry (D), Anthony Williams (D) and Vincent Gray (D). Scheeder also served as member of the DC Democratic State Committee and for a term as an Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner.

Scheeder's intelligence, political acumen and organizational abilities quickly brought her to the attention of Ambrose. The councilwoman often solicited the aid of community volunteers for special projects. Ambrose appointed Scheeder to the 2000 Redistricting Taskforce.

Helming EMCAC

In 2004, Ambrose tapped Scheeder to fill the seat appointed by the Ward Councilmember on the Eastern Market Community Advisory Commission (EMCAC). EMCAC is the advisory board of stakeholders created under Ambrose's landmark legislation, which established the governance under which Eastern Market still functions.

EMCAC Vice Chair Monte Edwards recalls leaving the second EMCAC meeting attended by Scheeder,

"I was walking away from the meeting with Donna, and told her that I was impressed with her observations at the meeting, and the EMCAC could best benefit from her insights and expertise if she were a member of the executive committee. I told her I would step down from my position as Vice Chair so she could assume that position. Donna's reply was 'No, I think I would like to be Chair.'"

Elected chair at the next meeting, Scheeder helmed the EMCAC for 18 years. In the words of Edwards, her tenure was "to the absolute benefit of the Market."

"Donna to me was always 'the library lady,'" recalled Councilmember Betty Anne Kane (D), a friend of Scheeder from her first days on the Hill. "She had a fierce determination, steadiness and dog-

gedness about her. Then, she took on the worst job on Capitol Hill, chairing EMCAC," she added.

The job was difficult. Market stakeholders frequently clashed. Warring community factions held strong conflicting opinions on the institution's future. All of this coalesced into a heady, combustible mixture at monthly EMCAC meetings. Scheeder kept the peace, chairing the gatherings with a deft combination of wit, poise, directness and finesse. Outside meetings, Scheeder proved a tough critic of The Market's nonprofit managers, a welcome ally to Ward 6 councilmembers and a persistent lobbyist for The Market's interests at the Council.

"Scheeder's consistency of leadership made it possible for other community members to remain engaged," said Ward 6 Councilmember Tommy Wells (D).

The 2007 Eastern Market Fire

In the wee hours of April 30, 2007, the historic Eastern Market caught fire. Scheeder had just flown in from a meeting of the Board of Directors of the International Library Association at The Hague. "I had my window (open), it was beautiful out, and I thought it smells smoky around here," she recalled in her Capitol Hill History interview. She turned on the television, "I go 'Oh my God, the Market,'" she recalled. Throwing on clothing, she walked up to the Market's burning ruin just as the mayor arrived.

The fire, Scheeder believed, could not have happened at a more fortuitous moment. A collaboration between EMCAC and the District had already spent months working on plans to renovate the structure. An architect had been selected to lead a phased repair in order to allow existing South Hall merchants to stay in business. EMCAC was about to review the 90 percent drawings.

While many hands were involved in making the restoration of Eastern Market successful, Scheeder played a unique role. She and Edwards kept a watchful eye on the renovation's plans and subsequent construction. Recognizing that the Eastern Market was as much a community as a physical structure, she worked with Nicky Cymrot and Gary Peterson of the Capitol Hill Community Foundation to raise funds in order to provide relief to the merchants impacted by the fire.



Donna Scheeder arrives to the reopening of Eastern Market by horse carriage. Photo: Andrew Lightman

Scheeder played the principle role in managing the expectations of the Market's diverse stakeholders as the District figured out how to preserve both the building and its businesses. It was a difficult series of transitions. First, the city closed the 300 block of Seventh Street SE and allowed merchants to operate on the Farmers' Line. Then, Scheeder helped facilitate their move to a temporary tent structure constructed next to what is now C Street.

Scheeder proved a deft consensus builder, keeping all the market's factions of merchants, vendors and community activists united during this difficult period. She was a tough realist. In the fire's wake, she supported the controversial District takeover of the Market's operations both in and out of doors. Understanding the importance of the outside vendors to the Market's success, she backed the city's weekend closures of the 200 and 300 blocks of 7th St. SE against the objections of many of the South Hall Merchants and allied community activists.

"Donna was the real face of the community and the Market with the District government and the council," said Peterson.

In April of 2009, the Capitol Hill Community Foundation awarded Scheeder its Communi-

ty Achievement Award in recognition of her work with the Market. On June 26 of that year, she joined Mayor Fenty and Councilmember Wells at Eastern Market's reopening. Scheeder continued to chair EMCAC up to her final days.

Scheeder's neighborhood activism went well beyond her involvement in Democratic politics and the Eastern Market. She was an active participant in the planning of the Hine School Project and the Eastern Market Metro Plaza. Scheeder also served on the Hill Center's Board since its inception. As president of its Board from June 2020 until her death, she helped steer that institution through the pandemic's difficult days.

Gone But Not Forgotten

The past years have depleted the ranks of Capitol Hill's elders. The names of Bill Phillips, John Franzén, Barbara Held, Margot Kelly, Steve Cymrot, Sharon Ambrose and Dick Wolf spring instantly to mind. The Hill Rag has written of the importance of their lives. It is a sad, but necessary duty to write now of Scheeder.

Perhaps the best person to sum up Scheeder's impact is Ward 6 Councilmember Charles Allen (D), who worked closely with her in the wake of the fire as chief of staff to Councilmember Wells and later when he himself ascended the dais. "We are all lucky for having Donna as our neighbor and friend," said Allen. "More than ever, her calm and wise leadership in our community – in particular around Eastern Market – is a model we should aspire to."

A celebration of the life of Donna Scheeder will be held on June 14, 2022 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the Hill Center 921 Pennsylvania Ave SE. Scheeder is survived by her partner Peter Waldron. ♦

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