A LEGACY OF CHANGE

Photo by Susan McInnis
Ruth Lister arrived in Fairbanks with her 15-month-old daughter, Cady Sky, on her hip. She was a tallish, willowy Canadian, a hippie girl with long blond hair.

In time, Lister would transform the university’s Tanana Valley Campus, and make a broad range of positive changes for Alaska women, children and families. But in 1976, she really had just two concerns: a job and child care.

Enep’ut Children’s Center, at the foot of College Hill then and now, answered both. Lister worked at her daughter’s daycare until friends who ran a garage in Fox got a contract to rebuild engines and build and refurbish trucks. The owner wanted to hire women, which suited Lister fine. She pulled on overalls and began fabricating dashboards and fenders, and doing the electrical and plumbing work on big rigs.

But she had worked on women’s health and poverty issues in New York while in grad school. They were the issues that galvanized her passion and intellect. In a 1995 interview with Pete Pinney, now associate dean for UAF’s College of Rural and Community Development, she said, “Coming from the ‘60s, the question was, ‘Are you going to stand outside and bash at problems, or are you going to get into the system and start making change?’ And I think what happened to me was that I tried to get into the system and tried to make some change.”

She worked on women’s issues in Fairbanks when she took over as executive director at the women’s crisis center, now known as the Interior Alaska Center for Non-Violent Living, about the time Cady started school. In six years there, she steered the domestic-violence shelter and rape crisis center into maturity. She built lasting coalitions among agencies — law enforcement, the courts, the military, Native organizations, social and children’s services — forging new protocols and relationships, and helping responders find and work towards common goals, all of which meant they could better serve the people who needed them.

She helped establish the Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, which at its height represented 21 programs, in Emmonak, Barrow and Homer, as well as in Fairbanks and Anchorage.

In the mid-1980s, Alaska Gov. Steve Cowper hired Lister to chair the Alaska Women’s Commission, where, according to Sherrie Goll, then lobbyist for the Alaska Women’s Lobby, Lister was instrumental in many legislative changes, including protecting women’s rights to pensions, inheritance, child support and child custody, and equal pay. Said Goll, “That so many of the bills on her list passed is a legacy left Alaska by the Women’s Commission and by Ruth herself.”

Lister stayed with Truck Services about four years, dropping Cady off at Enep’ut during the day. She also volunteered at Crisis Line twice a week, and at a fledgling women’s crisis center. She lobbied the hospital administration for a good birthing room.

When Enep’ut’s founder decided to move on, Lister took over, managing a free-spirited, whole-wheat-and-fruit-for-snacks business where she learned budgeting and staff management on the wing.

A mechanic with a Ph.D.

Probably no one at Enep’ut knew she had done her graduate work at Cornell, or that her Ph.D. was in micrometeorology and mathematics. She had grown up in an intellectual and creative, if rigorous, Toronto household. Her mother studied economics at Cambridge and Radcliffe before shifting gears to become an accomplished landscape architect. Her father studied at Oxford, and was a professor of chemistry at the University of Toronto for more than 30 years. By the time she earned her Ph.D., Lister was headed for research or a professorship.

UAF alumni featured in this story: Cady Lister, ’99, ’01; Pete Pinney, ’88
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Susan McInnis, ’76, ’99, is an instructor for UAF’s Center for Distance Education.

Life-changing diagnosis

Just before taking that job, Lister learned she had breast cancer. She said it broke her heart, but she took it on like she did everything else. She learned as much as she could, got the best doctors and support network she could find, and fought to win. She did win, against bad odds, for nearly 18 years. Before her death in 2002, she raised Cady and then delighted in two granddaughters. She worked, as she always had, as long as she could, committed to changing for the better whatever came into her hands.

When Lister took the helm at UAF’s Tanana Valley Campus in 1991, she applied much of what she had learned in her previous professional and volunteer work to move TVC beyond college prep and continuing education courses.

She talked with Interior employers about the skills they needed in employees. TVC subsequently developed two-year programs in technical, vocational and career studies. She said in 1995, “We want businesses to know that the courses we provide benefit not just students. Employers gain trained staff and create a workforce with upgraded skills. The training we provide can save employers money in the short- and long-term.” Students, she said, needed to be prepared for both life and work. “In addition to career and technical skills, students need math, communications and problem-solving skills if they want to be a part of a 21st-century workforce.”

Today TVC graduates paralegals and paramedics, chefs, mechanics, IT specialists, bookkeepers, welders, health care workers and more. The success at TVC is the kind Lister liked best — everybody gets something useful: students, faculty, employers, the community and the economy.

In the 1995 interview with Pete Pinney, Lister said that the times “and personal experiences, too, led me to want to try and make change. I felt fortunate to be educated and was pretty competent at doing things, so I had the opportunity … And I guess I have a very strong belief in trying to use the political process to make change.” Asked about a mark of success, she answered simply, “There are resources for people.”

Cady, who spent many hours as a child under boardroom tables looking at people’s shoes while her mother built coalitions a few feet above her, said, “She told me from the get-go that people have a duty to give back to their communities. That there’s a bigger picture and a greater good to think about.”

Ruth Lister Memorial Scholarship

The Lister Scholarship benefits single mothers attending the Tanana Valley Campus who are in good academic standing and who demonstrate motivation, academic and leadership potential. The endowment has reached $100,000, and has awarded $6,700 since 2004, to Judith Sam (human services technology), Muriel Bell (registered nursing), Vanessa Derendoff (applied accounting), Melonie Robinett (paralegal studies), and Hope Roberts (applied business).

“In my education I hope that I am also an example to my children. I hope they will internalize what they have seen in what I am doing to become all they want to be in life.” — Muriel Bell

“This world is so different from that of my ancestors. Back then it was about survival and staying healthy. We have a lot on our plate today. We not only need an education to survive, but we also need to keep the Native culture alive to pass what we know on to our children.” — Vanessa Derendoff

Melonie Robinett, 2007 scholarship recipient

Hope Roberts, 2008 scholarship recipient