

Land Trust faces funding challenge

by Dr. Rupert Cutler

Cordelia Scaife May of Ligonier, Pennsylvania—an heir to the Mellon fortune known as Cordy to her friends—was one of the wealthiest women in the United States and as nice a person as you can imagine, with a rich sense of humor and an especially kind way with young people. Without Mrs. May's early and continuing financial support, through her foundations based in Pittsburgh, the Western Virginia Land Trust would have been unable to hire staff for who knows how many years after its founding in 1996. Cordy died of pancreatic cancer on January 26, 2005, the year in which she was recognized in the Chronicle of Philanthropy as the single most generous person in the United States.

With Cordy's generous initial grant in the bank as the basis of my salary, I was able to leave my post at the head of the Explore Park staff to become WVLT's founding executive director in 1997. Cordy and I met in 1983 when I became the executive director of a nonprofit organization she funded in Washington, D.C., called Population-Environment Balance (PEB). When I left in 1987 to become the president and CEO of Defenders of Wildlife, Cordy was kind enough to direct her foundations to give Defenders generous grants based on our personal acquaintance.

That fortunate circumstance continued when we moved to Roanoke in December of 1990 and I eventually became the first executive director of Virginia's Explore Park. Needless to say, the boards that ran Explore Park were nonplussed when I decided to become the first executive director of the Western Virginia Land Trust and "take my Cordy money with me," but that was the only way the land trust could have hired staff.

One of my favorite memories of Cordy May is of her being a good sport under tough circumstances. During a meeting of the board of directors of PEB in Guatemala, we took a trip to the Mayan ruins at Tikal and stayed in a run-down motel, the only accommodations to be had. Despite rain leaking through the roof onto her in the crude bathroom, she came out in the morning smiling and uncomplaining.

Long after I left the land trust, my wife Gladys and I made annual trips to Ligonier to have lunch with Cordy to provide her with reports on the progress being made by WVLT and how her grants were being put to good use. On my last trip to Ligonier to see Cordy, she took us to the Ligonier Country Club where my twin great grandsons ordered burgers and enjoyed her friendly attention and hospitality and the view over the fine golf course. She was unique and a joy to know, and the Western Virginia Land Trust got off to its fast start because of her generosity.

Rupert Cutler is WVLT's founding executive director.

May Foundations had been WVLT's Most Important Source of Funds



Cordelia Scaife May

Read how you can help replace this funding in the Director's report on page 4.