

SYLVIA STUBER HEAP
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Max Delsignore: Northern New York Community Podcast. Stories from the heart of our community.

Hi everyone, and welcome to another edition of the Northern New York Community Podcast. I'm your host, Max Delsignore. We have another special community conversation to share with you, so let's get started.

At the center of Sylvia Heap's lifelong commitment to philanthropy has been service. If there was a local project, organization startup, or initiative that needed an extra boost, she seemed to be there with a helping hand. In our chat with Sylvia she will share why citizen philanthropy has been so gratifying, plus she will give details about a couple of efforts that she is most proud of: participating in the establishment of Jefferson Community College, and helping with the launch of a public broadcasting station in the region. Finally we will talk about what the North Country has meant to her and her family, and why philanthropy is vital to the future of our communities.

Sylvia, it is a great pleasure having you here on the podcast.

Sylvia Heap: Thank you, Max.

Max Delsignore: It's hard to believe nearly 60 years ago you and your husband walker came to Northern New York. Could you share just some details about the move and your arrival to the area?

Sylvia Heap: Sure. I had been at Yale Medical School many years, the four years, and then Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he had his internship and residency. When we were finishing up, my brother's good friend Dr. John McCreary who lived in Watertown said they're in need of an orthopedic surgeon in Watertown, and we should take a look. So we did.

We came here to Watertown, and Dr. And Mrs. McCreary entertained us in their home. They had a little boy who was the same age as our own little boy, and so we had an immediate connection. They said that there were two hospitals here, they had no orthopedic surgeon, they were sending the difficult cases to Syracuse. This was pretty much a deciding factor for my husband. He really felt it was a place where he would be needed. He was so busy the first day that he was working until 11:00 at night, and within a couple of years we were able to send for another person, Dr. James Fish, who is one of our other residents at the University of Michigan. It was an immediate opportunity for him.

For me it wasn't quite as easy, because we arrived quite liberal young people coming from New Haven Connecticut, from Ann Arbor Michigan, and Watertown was a much more conservative community. We found wonderful people. We were going to All Souls Church at that time, and Henry Case, Rick Jones, there were a number of people who were very active in the community who were members of that church. I got involved with the art committee

immediately, at the church, and then they asked me if I would do public relations for the development of a religious education wing there. It was the old stone church on Washington Street, and the old church burned in 1958, I think. Back that up. It was 1985 when it burned. Reversing numbers here.

Max Delsignore: Going back a little further in time, you and your husband are Bates College alumni.

Sylvia Heap: Yes.

Max Delsignore: How you met's a really interesting story. Can you tell us what the first interaction was like between the two of you?

Sylvia Heap: Sure. He was a football player, and it was a football Saturday, and there at Bates they have a dance at Chase Hall for the whole school. The girls come in a group, and it was at that time when girls' dormitories and men's dormitories were separate. The girls came in a group, and the guys in another group, and my husband has a story. It's better to hear him tell it really. Because he says he looked across the dance floor and he said, "That's for me!" His story is that he knocked down 12 guys getting to me. The number varies according to the time he tells it, but anyhow, that was the story. The idea was that if a man asked you to dance the seventh dance, that meant he wanted to walk you home, back to the dormitory. He asked me not only for the seventh dance, but every dance, and nobody else cut in.

When we got back to the dormitory I went in and all of my friends were sitting in the lounge and waiting for me, and they said, "Do you know who that is?" I said, "Yes, it's Walker Heap." They said, "He was making all of the touchdowns in the football game today!" I said, "Yes, but he can dance."

Max Delsignore: The two of you hit off so well, and before you came you mentioned Yale and Michigan, the stops that you had there. One of the things in our first conversation we had before today's interview, you had talked about the sacrifice each of you would have to make to have some of the goals that you had as a couple, and to grow your family, to make those a reality. Can you share just a little bit about those stops at Yale and Michigan, and as a couple trying to figure out, how are we best going to achieve our goals and the things we want to do?

Sylvia Heap: We knew that he wanted to be a doctor, and was admitted to Yale Medical School. The year after we graduated I got a job working as a [inaudible 00:05:55] director in Holyoke, Massachusetts, and so I was able to save some money, and at the end of that year, in 1951, we were married. Then I got a job at the community house in West Haven, Connecticut, because he had to have somebody help him get through school. He was on the GI Bill getting through college, but medical school and internship and residency, he needed me to work.

We started out, and we lived in Quonset hut village that's right near the Yale Bowl, and there were a lot of young people. You share a whole Quonset hut. It was cut in half, and the door was on either side. It was not much question about what was going on in the other half. There's not a great deal of privacy. It was a good community, nevertheless.

My job was at the community house, and I had to walk four miles to go across Forest Road to get to the community house, and he would ride his bicycle to his classes at Yale. After a while it got to the point where we thought, there has to be a more efficient way. I took a bus for a while that had to go down into New Haven, and then the bus back up to West Haven, but we decided that we would use the money and buy a car. We bought a car, a very much used car, but we called her Desdemonia de Heaps. There was our money.

We went through those years of medical school and residency and internship, we said they were years of genteel poverty. Because we were both well-educated, and very much interested in the community and in the work we were doing, but there wasn't a great deal of money.

Max Delsignore: How did that experience, and living in that way, how did that tailor, or influence, your willingness to give back in your community, or the places that you lived, prior to coming to Watertown?

Sylvia Heap: Of course having had an experience of not having much money, we were in sympathy with other people who didn't have much money, so that all of our lives I guess we've tried to be somewhat frugal. I think we can jump ahead and think to the times when we were working here too, that my husband provided free care for all of the doctors and their families, for the ministers and their families, The Sisters of Mercy. All of these people were patients who he did not charge.

We had a wonderful story that we heard the other day that our new daughter in law told of a friend of hers who, her mother had an experience where her daughter was in the hospital and the bill was getting big, and it was coming towards Christmas time and she wasn't going to have money enough to buy Christmas presents. She went to Dr. Heap and she said, "Could we defer payment for a while?" He said, "Yes." He took the bill and he wrote "Paid in full" on it, which was something that she remembered and still comments on.

Max Delsignore: Those values, and that willingness to be able to give to those in need, you both have that as part of your fabric in your being. Where did some of those values, do you think, come from? How did you get to this point where you felt giving back was so important to both of you?

Sylvia Heap: My parents were both community-oriented. My dad was a minister at the beginning, and then he got involved more and more in national and international work. He was one of the heads of the World Council of Services,

and church world service was one of his projects. Interesting, he also got a job where he was ahead of the foundation for the Japanese International Christian University in Tokyo, Japan. He would go back and forth to Japan to get that university started. He was also present at the founding of the United Nations, in San Francisco in 1945. So much of that was reflected in my own growing up. My mother too, even though we thought of her as being the church organist and choir director and mother, developed her leadership skills too, and she became the national president of the American Baptist Women, and was awarded a Doctor of Humane Letters degree from Bates College. It was her college too.

Max Delsignore: How did they inspire you?

Sylvia Heap: I think by just their presence, by their own attitudes. We got involved, of course, as young people. There was a youth council of churches then, and we did a number of things to help in the community. One of the things, that was a time when race relations were very strained, and we had at least one young black person in our group. We started checking with the restaurants in the area to see how they would react to a mixed racial group, and then we decided that we would boycott the restaurants that would not welcome a racially mixed group. It was another one of the things growing up. Then my dad's involvement in the United Nations too, we had, on the United Nations, a United Nations float for the 4th of July parade there in Ridgewood, and we would invite students from International House in New York City to be our guests, and stay in our homes.

Max Delsignore: Then all those experiences at a young age, I feel like, gave you such a great foundation for when you and your husband arrived in Watertown. You had kind of this global view of community. There were a couple of folks you mentioned early on, Rick Jones, Henry Case, those that kind of engaged you right away. What were a couple of the early projects that you participated in as soon as you settled here in Watertown.

Sylvia Heap: Really, just as soon as we settled here I got involved in Jefferson Community College. Because we had gotten the Watertown Daily Times, as soon as my husband thought that he might be interested in coming here we got the Watertown Daily Times. We found that there was a citizens' committee for a community college in Jefferson County, and it was being put up to the Board of Supervisors to make their decision. The Board of Supervisors decided that they would have a public referendum on it. When we arrived I called Russ Penny, who was the head of the Citizens' Committee, and I said, "Is there anything I can do to help?" He said, "Anything you can do to help?" It was a rather unusual phone call.

The next morning two very tall men, both over six feet tall, were at my front door. This was Graham Hodges, the minister of the congregational church, and Russ Penny himself. They presented me with a list of shut-ins from different churches. The idea was that I would contact these shut-ins and have them hand-address brochures that would be telling the benefits of a community college in

Jefferson County. I traipsed around to these different people and managed to get them, several of them, to say that they would do it, and then they would address them for us, we would pick them up and mail them.

After speaking to groups and doing various other things, we lost that first referendum by eight votes. That was not exactly a blow, but it was a call for beginning again. So we started over again. Again, visiting many different groups in the community, the rotary, the College Women's Club, all the various other groups. Then the second referendum was held, and that ... Oh, I wanted to tell you too that one of the things things I was asked to do was to have a discussion with high school students about whether or not they would be interested in attending a community college. It was very fruitful, because so many young people would love to go to college but they couldn't afford it, and having a college right here made it possible for them to think about higher education. That was instrumental, I think, too. All the contacts that were made helped us to pass the referendum by 2,900-and-something votes. It was a big success.

Max Delsignore: Why was this effort in trying to establish Jefferson Community College in this area, why was that effort so important to you?

Sylvia Heap: I had been interested in education for a long, long time, but living in communities where there was a college, New Haven, Ann Arbor, we could see how much a community benefits from having staff, faculty, students, in their community. Yes, it meant a great deal to me.

Max Delsignore: That wasn't your only thing that you did. Once JCC was established there were other things you decided to kind of pursue once the college was up and running. What were some of the things that you decided to keep going with to keep your engagement with the college the same?

Sylvia Heap: I got involved with the continuing education. The person who was in charge had to resign quite quickly, and I was chosen to be the head of the continuing education advisory board. I had that job for 30 years, and we did some very good things too. We were able to get a bus going from central Watertown out to the college so that people would be able to get there by bus. We started the daycare for students who needed to have a child taken care of while they were taking classes. There were a whole lot of projects that we did in that. That was with D. Rene Valentine as the head of continuing education.

Max Delsignore: How has the college changed since inception?

Sylvia Heap: Oh, it's grown. It's grown immensely and it's grown beautifully. Now with the new dormitory people can stay right on campus and that increases the sports opportunities and cultural opportunities. Carol McCoy has been a superb president of the community college. I have met with all of the previous presidents too, and Carol has taken the reigns and done such a beautiful job.

We just are very, very proud of the work she's done. She received the Athena Award this past year for her work.

Max Delsignore: Another project that was kind of early on but very much of strong interest to you was starting public television in this area. You were asked to help launch WNPE, WNPI, and served on the board for 10 years. What was that experience like for you, and how were you engaged to help get that launched in this area?

Sylvia Heap: One of the things ... Of course I really believed in the opportunities of having people in their own homes have that kind of an educational experience, because we called it educational television. It was providing an alternative to other kinds of television, and we really appreciated that. I was asked to be in charge of a special program that was called The Puzzle Children. This was the story of dyslexia, and what was being done to combat it. I discovered that my own son had some tendencies toward being dyslexic, so I found another doctor's wife in Syracuse whose son had been having problems with dyslexia, and she came up and we interviewed her, and we talked with a number of doctors and other people for that after-program of The Puzzle Children.

Then another project that I got involved in was the Chemical People project. That was the one that was initiated by Nancy Reagan. This was a national project that was on public television, and we established groups in three counties and in southern Ontario to have people watch the program, and then there would be followups with the help of Father Ray, and Bobby Lehe, and Edie Marsela, and others in the community. We had the programs, and then in the newspaper we had a We Care column, which was so that people could read and see ways of combating alcohol and drug abuse among young people.

Max Delsignore: How does public television added to the quality of life in this community?

Sylvia Heap: I think immensely. It provides an alternative. More than that, this station has connected with Canada. We call it a two-nation station. This was something that we would actually go across the border in order to establish some of these things. Like for instance the dyslexia was something. It has offered excellent programming, and one of the things that I appreciate so much, and make sure that my husband watches diligently, are the musical programs and the arts programs.

Max Delsignore: As we go down the list, you've been an organizer, you have vast public relations experience, you've been a volunteer, you've been an educator, and the list goes on. There's a lot that you've done. This combination of involvement really defines your citizen philanthropy. Of all these activities, what have you enjoyed, or did you enjoy, the most?

Sylvia Heap: That's hard to say, but I think perhaps ... I worked with a medical, what's called auxiliary, years before, The Doctors' Wives, and I have always been interested in activity and dance and physical activity. The Medical Alliance started a program

nationwide called Shape Up For Life, and this was something that was done for particularly women, but children, helping them learn healthy ways of eating, of exercising. With that, I would go to the different meetings, state meetings and even national meetings, and I was asked to do exercise breaks instead of coffee breaks. This was very short times in between sessions when people would get up and stretch and do little aerobics in place. Those are things that I enjoyed a lot.

The other thing is that I carried that interest to one of the classes at JCC too. We had some people ... Excuse me. Some people asking for classes for women in exercise and fitness and all, and there didn't seem to be anyone at that time who was just ready for it. I took courses with Bonnie Prudden, with Jacki Sorensen, aerobic dancing with yoga, with meditation, and started a workshop of my own, and did that for seven years.

Max Delsignore: You've assisted with so many projects, programs, at all three levels, local, state, federal, and many of these opportunities happened because people asked you to participate, or you pursued them on your own. Who are a few of the other local friends or peers that you feel are responsible for your level of citizen philanthropy.

Sylvia Heap: I think probably ... We talked about Russ Penny and Graham Hodges, for sure. Graham was a friend and mentor, and a very creative person.

Max Delsignore: Are there others that stand out, other individuals that maybe you haven't mentioned, that participate on so many projects with you over the years?

Sylvia Heap: One I think of particularly is Joan Jones, who is the head of Lyric Theater. I was asked to be on the board of Lyric Theater for ... That [inaudible 00:22:47] was over 10 years. First of all I started out doing public relations, and started with, South Pacific was the first, and we were doing public relations for three shows a year, which was really, Joan would say finished one and started right in on another. She had that tremendous energy and ability to present these wonderful shows. One that we did, we did 1776, which was in 1976, and we had different members of the community who played the roles of all of the different signers of the Declaration of Independence. I had articles in the newspaper that would show each of those people dressed in their costumes, and then tell something about who it was they represented, and also who they were as actors. That was one of the things that we did to try to draw more people into the Lyric theater. Had some excellent, excellent performers at that time, [Jay Leafland and others, just wonderful young people.

Max Delsignore: When you look back at the range of things that you've been fortunate enough to participate in, or programs that you've started, how does it feel to give back the way that you and your husband have over all of these years, and particularly here in Watertown?

Sylvia Heap: I think it's been an enlarging experience in general, because all of these different activities, made friends in so many different areas, and with wonderful, wonderful people.

Max Delsignore: One of the things we've talked about with this podcast, too, is trying to inspire the next generation to give as your generation has. If a high school student or a young professional was asking you for advice on how to get started in getting involved in the community, what advice would you share with that person?

Sylvia Heap: I would say find out what your own interests are, and then pursue those. Because if there isn't an organization then maybe they can find another area where there has been a successful organization, and use that as a guide. In my own family my three children are all involved in some kind of service work. My oldest is a doctor, and she was a doctor on an Indian reservation for 28 years, and now she's started a new practice of integrative medicine up in Maine, because she felt that there needed to be more emphasis on the food, exercise, sleep, fellowship. Our son works at Fort Drum in the environmental program there. Our youngest daughter is a respiratory therapist. She became interested that, one of the incidental things was, that I get asthma from various things, and so she has been helping people who have lung problems and have disease, and saving a lot of lives that way.

Also, carry to the next generation, our grandson, our oldest grandson, was in the mock United Nations ... Model United Nations, excuse me, the model United Nations, in Minnesota where he grew up, and our granddaughter was their secretary of the model United Nations in Syracuse. They have carried out, at my father's interest and my own interest, I haven't mentioned that through our church I have been the envoy to our United Nations office in New York City, and this year was the 40th year. I was recognized for the 40 years of service as an envoy.

Way back, Adlai Stevenson suggested that churches could have a representative acting as an envoy between the church and the United Nations, and helping to bring the message of what was going on in the world body back to their own churches. I started out in 1975, and would go to the spring seminars there at the United States, in our United Nations office, and then [inaudible 00:27:16] had a United Nations Sunday, always, a service in our church.

Max Delsignore: To have so many generations of your family beginning to exhibit philanthropy in their own way, how gratifying is it for you and your husband to see the generations, the legacy of your family, kind of continuing on in philanthropy, and having them kind of participating in making their communities better, in a way?

Sylvia Heap: It's wonderful. Because I think we think in terms of, we talk about legacy, and part of our legacy is not just the organizations that we've supported and the development that they have made, but also that our children are going to be

able to carry on, and grandchildren, with some feeling of the importance of service to community. That, I think, as we grow older, this is an important part of our lives, that we realize that what we are leaving behind is going to be helpful.

Max Delsignore: To dovetail off that point, what do you hope will be the legacy for you and your husband in this community? If you could describe it, what would you say is the legacy of Sylvia and Dr. Walker Heap here in Watertown?

Sylvia Heap: It encompasses so many different organizations. I think, though, that we have made a difference in the community. He started the North Country Orthopedic Group, and with all of its doctors now ... Also, he started a shooting preserve in Evans Mills, and taught people safety and how to ... He raised pheasants, incubated pheasant eggs. He would go out and gather some of the pheasant eggs and take them to our Sunday school class, and children could hold a pheasant egg and watch it pip, and see the way that life is originating. These were going to be pheasants that would grow up and be able to be released in the wild.

Max Delsignore: That's a wonderful lesson to share, in that kind of example. Why do you believe citizen and community philanthropy is so important to the North Country's future as a whole?

Sylvia Heap: Because there are people who are in need in this community, and there are organizations that are in need of help, and people need to be able to see what they themselves are able to do to help the organizations.

Max Delsignore: There are institutions, programs, classes, that are still impacting residents in our region, all because of your ambition and thoughtfulness. You have said before that legacy is your life, and what a life it's been for you and your husband. We've all been fortunate enough to benefit from your good work and passion for this community, and we appreciate you coming on the podcast to share your story and what these experiences have meant to you.

Sylvia Heap: Thank you. There's one story I want to tell you about, this is when I was pursuing the fitness ... There was a program called Fitness For The 80s that was in Washington DC, and it was originated by the American Medical Association and Senator Ted Kennedy, which was a pretty unusual combination. It was classes, and there were a lot of celebrities there. In between one session, one woman came up to me and she said, "Are you somebody?" I thought, "What a question. Am I somebody?" I knew that what she meant was, "Are you famous". I think that part of the legacy is that we try to help people find the somebodies that they are, and then reach out to other people.

Max Delsignore: I know this area, this community, certainly appreciates the "somebody" that you and your husband have been for so long, and what you've meant to this area. It means a great deal to us, and to have your story that will hopefully inspire

others in the next generation to follow your lead is certainly what we hope for. Thank you for being such a great example for us to follow in this community.

Sylvia Heap: Thank you, Max.

Max Delsignore: Thanks again for tuning in to this edition of the Northern New York Community Podcast. We hope you enjoyed this episode with Sylvia Heap. We are grateful to have the support of WPBS TV and the Northern New York Community Foundation so we can continue sharing these conversations about community philanthropy on this very platform. Stay tuned for more great stories from the heart of our community, and thanks again for listening.

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