

Louise Spiegel, 1924-2022, - A Citizen Activist For All Seasons
(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

Louise Spiegel died on July 4th. Active until well into her nineties, she served as an inspiration and a model for so many civic activists in this city. In fact, she should be remembered as our "citizen activist for all seasons."



Although she grew up as part of Cincinnati's Jewish establishment, she spent her adult life advocating for those in need. Her first major role as an activist took place when she helped organize the urban Appalachians who migrated to Cincinnati and took up residence in Over-the-Rhine in the 1950s and 1960s. She was one of founders and an early leader of the Urban Appalachian Council, an organization designed to improve the conditions and defend the rights of these rural immigrants to the inner-city.

I first met Louise when she was working to promote the University of Cincinnati's outreach to that School's surrounding neighborhoods in the late 1970s. When she heard that I was doing some work on neighborhood organizing and the city's Community Councils, she arranged a meeting to discuss our interests. After that initial conversation, our friendship grew and she began including me in her circle of activist contacts.

Besides her leadership in organizing Urban Appalachians, Louise offered her talents and energy to the Woman's City Club and other civic groups. By the time that we met, she had grown concerned that the civic sector was losing clout in the public decision making process, and that corporate leaders had way too much power. Her goal became initiating ways to strengthen the citizen voice by better organizing civic and neighborhood groups. She began bringing together small groups of activists to talk about this problem and what to do about it.

When I launched Applied Information Resources as a non-profit in 1981, one of its stated goals was to provide information to citizens so that they were informed about community affairs and better prepared to take action either by voting or becoming advocates on critical public issues. This goal meshed with Louise's efforts, and she often called on AIR's support for her work. We informally shared ideas, and some of AIR's community issues forums dealt with the theme of how effective citizen organizing can bring about needed change.

One of Louise's solutions for increasing the civic sector's clout was coalition building. Instead of one group working by itself on a local issue or problem, put together an informal coalition of organizations to take on this task. One group is more likely to be ignored by government or outgunned by corporate business interests, while a coalition of organizations is harder to dismiss. Louise also knew that coalition building required time and organizing skills, and that these group collaborations were difficult to maintain over time. She often enlisted AIR's assistance in these efforts.

Louise organized one such collaboration, the Civic Confederation, in the early 1990s, and AIR became its unpaid staff. The Woman's City Club and the League of Women Voters were two of its members, and the Confederation met in the League's board room for monthly lunch meetings. As previously mentioned, Louise sought to advocate for those in need, and the group she promoted for Civic Confederation assistance was the growing population of children growing up in poverty in Cincinnati.

Louise felt that the Board and Administration of Cincinnati Public Schools had to do more to meet the needs of children in poverty, and she became convinced that this growing population required a full time, paid advocate to focus on its problems and potential solutions. In order to build public support around these issues, she persuaded the Civic Confederation to host several large dinner meetings that highlighted the current challenge confronting these children. Her persistence paid off. These meetings led to the establishment in Cincinnati of a local office of the Washington, D.C based Children's Defense Fund.

Age didn't slow Louise down. For over a decade, she became the Chair of AIR's board of trustees and continued her support of the Woman's City Club's activities. Her home in Clifton remained the meeting place for countless informal luncheons with diverse community leaders and civic activists, and she never stopped advocating for more effective citizen participation that would lift up people in need.

Why was she such a successful pied piper for her advocacy work with so many people? Although she took her causes very seriously, she did not take herself that way. She possessed a keen sense of humor and cared deeply about her friends and colleagues she was prodding to do more. Cincinnati will miss her day by day and year by year efforts to make this city a more equitable place to live. At a time when the city and the country desperately need more people like Louise Spiegel, we must remember her and let her life serve as a model for current and future activists.