Dotty Rosenfeld: A Lifetime of Social Work

Dorothy “Dotty” Jacobs Rosenfeld, BSSW 1947, talked about her time at Ohio State’s College of Social Work with a warm smile. Her education here helped her make a difference in people’s lives and, ultimately, changed her own. Dotty had considered criminology because she didn’t believe there was “such a thing as a bad boy or a bad girl.” Upon hearing that, an advisor suggested group work in the College of Social Work.

“I think he thought I was a little naive,” Dotty said, chuckling. She never regretted following that path.

Perhaps the biggest impact the College of Social Work made on Dotty is that it’s where she met her husband, Mayer Rosenfeld, BS 1939, MSW 1942, the man who told his shaking bride on their wedding day, “Take it easy. You’ll live longer.”

Mayer, a World War II veteran, was 10 years older than Dotty and a graduate teaching assistant when she was an undergraduate. Mayer had his undergraduate degree in Business, but he wanted to earn an MSW because of his draw to the recreation and group work aspects of social work.

Dotty was a student in Mayer’s class, but they hadn’t spent any time together outside of the classroom until a canoeing trip practicum that he organized in place of the final exam for his class in June of 1945. Dotty couldn’t swim but Mayer said she could ride in his canoe and he would watch out for her—with two chaperones along because Mayer was single!

That trip started a friendship and a romance that led to the Rosenfelds’ engagement in Chicago during a conference for volunteer leadership in the Jewish center movement. They went on to raise two daughters while using their social work expertise to make a difference in the Columbus Jewish community.

Although a promotion for Mayer took the family to Kansas City for two years, Columbus was always home. When they returned to Columbus in the early 1950s, Dotty put her Social Work degree to good use as the assistant director of Camp O’ra, part of the Jewish Center day camps. Later she was the director of the Jewish Home for the Aged, which served the elderly Jewish population before the construction of Wexner Heritage House. In that role, Dotty planned activities for the seniors and supervised the staff. Throughout her career, Dotty tapped the skills she learned in the social work program in positions such as the activities coordinator for Bexley,
OH, Recreation and Parks Department during the summers. There she helped to lead activities, including crafts, games, and music, at the playgrounds at all three elementary schools in Bexley.

Dotty went on to be the director of the Temple Israel religious school for many years. Later she returned to Ohio State and earned her degree in elementary education with an emphasis in reading. She started out as a substitute teacher for Columbus Public Schools and eventually got a job as a reading specialist, until her retirement in 1986.

Dotty was also an active volunteer for the Council of Jewish Women, B’nai B’rith Women and her temple.

While Mayer’s undergraduate degree gave him a foundation in business, his MSW gave him additional skills and an affinity for service that honed him as the successful leader he ultimately was. As a young man, he helped other social work students build a cabin on JCC-owned land east of Hoover Dam. Mayer and some others constructed the fireplace and chimney from individual stones. Mayer went on to leadership in Columbus’ Jewish Community Center (JCC). He spent most of his professional career at the original Schonthal Center, which became the JCC, and finally the Leo Yassenoff Center. Mayer was responsible for securing the grounds around the center—formerly a garbage dump—for ball diamonds and other recreational space.

Although he once turned down a full professorship in social work at Ohio State, Mayer did return to the university after his retirement from the JCC. He was an adjunct professor in recreation for two years in the 1970s. “He had several basketball players in his classes, including Big Jim Smith,” Dotty said. “He was very proud of that.”

Even after their respective retirements, the Rosenfelds wanted to keep making a difference for young people, particularly for Ohio State social work students. “Young people are able to find places where they can find positive activities, not only socially but intellectually, in the College of Social Work,” Dotty said.

That kind of regard for the college is, in part, what led the Rosenfelds to establish The Mayer & Dotty Rosenfeld Scholarship in the College Of Social Work to support students enrolled in the degree program in the college. Dotty explained: “The scholarship was the most important thing to me and to Mayer. We liked the idea of helping students.”