Goodman worked for peace, built Wingspread reputation

Former Johnson Foundation leader dies at 79

BY MARCI LAEHR TENUTA
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Friends and colleagues Wednesday mourned the loss of an extraordinary Racine woman who worked for peace most of her life.

Rita Goodman, the former vice president of the Johnson Foundation, died of cancer Friday at her home in Sarasota, Fla. She was 79.

Goodman, who was born and raised in Racine, specialized in women's issues, international affairs and international security. A colleague and president of the foundation, William Boyd, said Goodman was an extraordinary officer of the Johnson Foundation — specifically because she carried on the tradition of peace.

He said during the early days at Wingspread, the sprawling Johnson family home turned conference center where the foundation is based, the principle issues were that of peace and international affairs. Boyd said those issues are what Wingspread's global reputation were built on.

"Leslie Pfaffrath was the president of the Johnson Foundation. He came from Carnegie Endowment of International Peace in New York," Boyd said. "She (Goodman) carried forward that work. We're going back to the time of the Cold War. She established a very good relationship with people in that area — the policy makers."

Goodman, Boyd and Henry Halstadt, the former vice president and assistant secretary at the Johnson Foundation, worked together to coordinate hundreds of conferences with the movers and shakers of the world.

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discussing a wide range of topics — long before they became popular issues with the rest of society.

“She had a very large portfolio and a very important portfolio,” Halstadt said. “She was an extremely able and professional conference leader and coordinator.”

Goodman was ahead of her times in so many areas, and she lived by her principles, according to her oldest son David Goodman.

David said before his mom joined the Johnson Foundation in 1962 she majored in social work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and later took on volunteer work while raising her three sons with husband Arnold Goodman.

“In the 1950s she was very active in all kinds of volunteer work,” David said. “I specifically remember the work she did for the League of Women Voters.”

David said his mom started out part time at the Johnson Foundation but soon became a leader in the organization.

Goodman moved to Florida shortly after she retired from the Johnson Foundation in 1988.