

Julie McDonald Commentary: AAUW 58-Year Member Priscilla Tiller Recalls Seaside Childhood During WWII



Priscilla Tiller is pictured in this photo provided by Chronicle columnist Julie McDonald.

By Julie McDonald / For The Chronicle, February 6, 2023



As a little girl growing up in the Oregon Coast town of Seaside, Priscilla Prouty often saw giant blimps floating overhead as they patrolled the coastline searching for enemy submarines.

It was a reality people on the coast experienced during World War II after a Japanese submarine fired shells on the U.S. Army's Fort Stevens at the mouth of the Columbia River on June 21, 1942, retaliating for a U.S. bombing of Japan in April known as the Doolittle Raid. The only casualties at Fort Stevens were a baseball diamond backstop, a power line and a soldier who cut his head rushing to report to his battle station.

Priscilla, who was born in 1940 in Astoria, was only a toddler at the time, but she recalled the tension and uncertainty as Seaside lay only 14 miles south of Fort Stevens.

"We were right on the beach," she said. "We lived very close to the ocean, and I remember the blimps going over every day."

She also recalled the little packet of yellow food coloring added to white margarine to make it more closely resemble butter. She also remembered the rationing of gasoline, tires, sugar, meat, coffee, butter, canned goods and shoes during the war. They walked everywhere.

"There were three of us born within a four-year period," she said. "And as children with very fast-growing feet, we did not have enough shoes. We went barefoot a lot."

Her mother, Jean (Smith) Prouty, sewed dresses for her and her younger sister, Jill, from their father's shirts. Her father, Richard Prouty, was exempted from military service as an essential worker with the Shell Oil Company distributorship. She also had a younger brother, Richard, who was named after their father.

When Priscilla was 8, her family moved to McMinnville, Oregon, where she graduated from high school in 1958. One of the people who most influenced her life was the high school principal, James B. Conaway, a WWII Navy veteran who passed away in 1989.

She could hardly wait to attend college at Willamette University in Salem (rather than Linfield College, which was much closer to home) to become a writer. Her first week on campus, in front of Eaton Hall, she met a young law student named Laurel Tiller, a native of Morton, Washington.

They both graduated from college in 1962, Laurel from law school and Priscilla with a degree in English and a minor in art. They married on the winter solstice, Dec. 22, 1962, and settled in Centralia, where Laurel joined the civil law practice of Lloyd B. Dysart, a second-generation later with a firm that became Dysart, Moore, Tiller & Murray. Her husband still practices law, she said, but he's slowing down.

In Centralia, Priscilla met Dysart's wife, Dorothy, one of the earliest members of the Lewis County branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), which this month celebrates its centennial.

“She was a very strong woman,” Priscilla recalled. “And she told me I was going to join.”

And she did.

The AAUW advocates for the equity and advancement of women and girls, and in 2015, Priscilla marked a half century as a member, including three terms as president.

“I was 12 when I joined,” she joked.

The branch initially met in members’ homes and later at the Centralia Timberland Regional Library before moving to the Gathering Place at Stillwater Estates.

She and Laurel welcomed a son and a daughter, Pete and Rachel, in 1963 and 1972, respectively. Both children followed their father into the practice of law at the Tiller Firm in Centralia. Pete is an appellate attorney who practices primarily in Tacoma, and Rachael practices criminal defense and juvenile law. Rachael, whose husband, Brian Elder, died in 2018, has two children, Emma and Ian.

“I knew from the time she was about 17 months old that she was going to be a lawyer,” Priscilla said. “She just carried herself like a lawyer.”

Priscilla, who taught art briefly at Vashon Island before starting her family, earned her master’s degree in English from Portland State University and worked four years at Centralia College as an English instructor.

In 2008, she taught English and history at the Southwest Petroleum University’s campus in Xindu, China, only about 30 miles from the epicenter of an 8.0-magnitude earthquake May 12. Almost 90,000 people were counted as dead or missing and presumed dead in the final official Chinese government assessment; the officially reported total killed included more than 5,300 children, the bulk of them students attending classes. In addition, nearly 375,000 people were injured. Her husband had arrived for a visit just before the Great Sichuan earthquake and experienced the severe aftershocks. She shared her experiences with Chronicle readers at the time, including how she and others rushed from the campus building when the quake hit at 2:35 p.m.

“My speedy descent down the stairs would easily qualify me for the Olympic track team,” she wrote. “I kept running away from the buildings even though the Chinese simply stood still after they got outside.”

ne student from Petroleum University broke his leg while fleeing among the frantic mob, and another broke his clavicle jumping from a third-floor window. A female student suffered from shock after learning her mother had been killed in the earthquake.

Priscilla has been active in AAUW much of her life. She recalled attending a meeting in the late 1980s at the Centralia Timberland Regional Library with only 11 women. Harriet Dooley, who sat across from her, asked if she thought the organization would continue.

“I said, ‘I think we’re finished.’” But the next day, Priscilla recruited Sandy Godsey to serve as vice president while she served as president, and they launched efforts to boost flagging membership by hosting interesting speakers to entice new members.

“By golly, we pulled everything out of the hat that we could,” she said.

Within two or three years, membership had increased fivefold, and the local chapter earned state and national recognition for its membership drive.

She still has the T-shirt she wore in 1993 at the first Expanding Your Horizons, an AAUW partnership with the Centralia College TRIO program to introduce sixth- through ninth-grade girls to careers in science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics. So does another 50-plus-year member, Jan Leth.

Many times graduates of the EYH program and recipients of the AAUW scholarships have pursued excellent careers.

Nearly all AAUW members work on the annual used book sale, which began in 1975 as a book and plant sale. It opens for a long weekend each year in early spring.

“Some people depend on us,” Priscilla said. “That last afternoon, we sell things, like I said, \$2 for a big bag of books. They depend on that for their year’s reading. They cannot afford books.”

A bookseller buys all the rejects, so they don’t need to haul stuff home.

Although many AAUW members also belong to the St. Helens Club, Priscilla said the Chehalis group was “very snooty” at one time as was the comparable Centralia group, the Ladies of the Round Table.

“I think the rivalry between the towns kept them that way,” she said.

I told her they can’t be snooty nowadays because they let me in.

At the AAUW, Priscilla has focused on raising money for scholarships and served 17 years as historian and four years as newsletter editor.

“Endeavors to raise money to support students is the adhesive that has held us together since our inception nearly a century ago,” she wrote in the AAUW newsletter.

“Friendships flourish within our branch. I am fortunate to be part of this congenial group.”

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