

Julie McDonald Commentary: Legendary WWII Correspondent Influenced Longtime Educator Jan Leth



Jan Leth is pictured in this photo by Julie McDonald.

By Julie McDonald / For The Chronicle, February 21, 2023

Bonnie Wiley, a legendary reporter and The Associated Press' only female war correspondent in the Pacific during World War II, interviewed Amelia Earhart, the first female aviator to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean.

She rubbed shoulders with great reporters such as Edward R. Murrow, covered combat at Iwo Jima and military operations at Okinawa, and witnessed the Japanese surrender aboard the U.S.S. Missouri in Tokyo Bay on Sept. 2, 1945. She interviewed Bataan Death March survivors and covered the war crimes arraignment of Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita.

Wiley, a Portland native, launched her career at The Yakima Morning Herald, managed a weekly newspaper in Toppenish, Washington, and worked as a feature writer at The Seattle Times and later as a reporter for the Portland Oregonian. She was writing for The Associated Press in San Francisco when she asked to cover the war.

Upon her return to the states, Wiley earned a journalism degree in 1948 from the University of Washington and eventually a doctorate from Southern Illinois University. She taught at Oregon State University, the University of Hawaii and the American Samoa Community College.

But it was at Central Washington University in Ellensburg that Wiley forged a lasting friendship with students on the staff of the Campus Crier, editor-in-chief Bill Leth, a Honolulu native who witnessed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor at the age of seven and graduated in 1953 from high school in Zillah, Washington, and his star reporter, Janet "Jan" Crooks.

Crooks was born in July 1938 at St. Anthony's Hospital in Wenatchee to Bob and Bernice "Bea" Crooks. She had an older brother, Robert. Her father was an auditor for Puget Sound Power and Light Co., so they moved around a lot while she was growing up. During World War II, they lived in Olympia and used ration stamps for gasoline, sugar, meat, coffee, butter and other items.

"My folks would share with the soldiers at Fort Lewis," she said. "My dad would go back and forth to Tacoma for business, and he'd pick up soldiers and bring them home to dinner."

She recalled meeting military men and women from all over the nation.

"We learned a lot from talking to them, hearing their different accents and learning why they were in the military," she said. "It was pretty interesting."

The family later returned to Wenatchee, where Crooks graduated from high school in 1956. She pursued her bachelor's degree at Central Washington University, where she met both her future husband, Bill Leth ... and the inimitable Wiley.

"She was a tough lady," Jan Leth recalled of Wiley, who died Sept. 23, 2000, in Honolulu at the age of 90. "She was a bright lady. She just took both of us under her wing. We stayed really close with her. She was a truly extraordinary person. She became godmother to our children."

After Bill and Jan Leth married on June 14, 1958, they moved to Portland, where Bill, who was more than three years older than Jan, found a teaching job at Park Rose Junior High. While in

Oregon, Jan gave birth to their first child, Shari, in 1958, and earned her bachelor's degree in English from Portland State University.

"I'm a big juggler of things," she said. "It never bothered me to do three or four things at once."

Her father paid her tuition; he wanted her to finish college. After graduating from PSU in 1962, Jan moved with her family to Centralia, where Bill taught journalism and business classes at the old Centralia High School and served 30 years as the school newspaper adviser. He later taught business and adult evening classes at Centralia College.

Jan gave birth to her son, Mark, in 1962, and taught English and drama at the old Centralia High School. Then, in 1964, after she gave birth to another daughter, Natalie, she quit working but returned to the classroom shortly afterward.

She worked at Centralia Junior High, now called the middle school, for 30 years, first as a teacher and then, after earning her master's degree in counseling and guidance from Central Washington University in 1963, as school counselor.

In 1970, Jan Leth joined the Lewis County branch of the American Association of University Women, which celebrates its centennial this month.

"I looked at my husband and I said, 'You know, my world is just filled with teaching and with babies, and I need some other stimulation,'" she recalled. "I feel like I'm getting pretty boring."

That was the same year she organized events for junior high students to celebrate the first Earth Day, which AAUW member Cathy Cavness recalled. Leth spearheaded efforts for students to learn more about the land they inhabit, tour dairy farms to see how they handle waste, clear weeds and debris from Mountain View Cemetery's pioneer section, and attend environmental symposiums. In doing so, she influenced the lives of students like Cavness, who joined AAUW in 2016 after she retired from 37 years of teaching.

Jan Leth immediately launched herself into AAUW, organized an assertiveness workshop at Centralia College, attended state conventions, lobbied the Legislature and assumed leadership roles, including as president in 1978–79.

"I don't join things I'm not active in," she said. "That's my mantra. If I join it, I'm active, and if I'm not active, I get out of it."

As state AAUW public policy chair, she became a vocal advocate for women's education. At the end of her term, the board asked her to serve as state president. She worked a full-time job with three children at home, so she declined.

She and her husband, Bill Leth, who was 86 when he died on June 30, 2021, only weeks after celebrating their 63rd wedding anniversary, enjoyed a good relationship. According to his obituary, he often described marrying her as the biggest event in his life.

"We had a real partnership," she said. They have two granddaughters, Kelly and Erin.

As an educator, she was involved in the Washington Education Association and lobbied for the WEA after retiring.

“I bargained one of the first contracts for teachers here in Centralia,” she said.

After retiring in June 1995, she was elected to the Centralia School Board, where she served a dozen years and became active in the Washington State School Directors Association. She stepped down in 2007 to spend more time with her husband and family.

She and Toledo’s Sharon Lyons helped boost membership in 2018 by involving the local AAUW branch in LUNAFEST, which screens movies by and about women to feature for viewing in a traveling film festival. LUNAFEST offers 48-hour passes for \$10 that entitle people to watch up to eight short movies. All proceeds benefit AAUW scholarships and Hope Alliance, which helps survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence.

“We needed to get new people in to make the organization viable,” she said, “and basically, that’s what we did.”

COVID-19 forced LUNAFEST to go virtual, but now it’s back in April as a hybrid event both online and at Centralia College.

During the pandemic, when meetings took place via Zoom, Jan wrote in the AAUW branch newsletter, “Just seeing a friendly face and chatting for a time has lifted my heart and raised my spirit.”

AAUW brings together interesting women involved in giving back to their community, she said. They attend educational programs and participate in smaller interest groups focused on reading, hiking, movie-going, baking, gardening, art, traveling, and discussion. Dues are \$87 a year.

When members could no longer gather at the local library, Leth was instrumental in moving meetings to the Gathering Place at Stillwaters Estates in Centralia. She’s also involved in the annual AAUW used book sale each spring (this year March 23 to 25 at the Centralia Moose Lodge) and the Expanding Your Horizons program in October to expose sixth- through ninth-grade girls to careers in science, technology, engineering, art and math. Occasionally the parents of boys have asked why they can’t attend, Leth said, and some have participated in the Saturday event.

She described AAUW as a great organization.

“I found a lot of very interesting women, and the women and their personalities are the ones who make the organization,” Jan said. “There’s just a lot of curiosity in the organization. There are all kinds of new people joining, and they bring so much to it. It’s a sort of a living, breathing organism.”

And, as with any organization, she said, “It gives back as much as you give in.”