

JOANNE LEWIS

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EDUCATION ADVOCATE.
PUBLISHED AUTHOR.
NON-PROFIT EXECUTIVE.
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TIRELESS ORGANIZER.
ARTS SUPPORTER.
WORLD TRAVELER.
CHHS ALUMNI
HALL OF FAME MEMBER.
VISIONARY.
MOTHER.
GRANDMOTHER.
WIFE.
FRIEND!

AND THAT'S JUST WHAT SHE'S MANAGED TO CRAM INTO HER FIRST 84 YEARS.

Born Joanne Waxman in 1933, she grew up in Cleveland proper before moving to Cleveland Heights at the age of 12. Though the city was not yet racially integrated, her new neighborhood boasted a diversity that was significant for the era. There were Italians and Germans, Jews and Irishmen, and a growing socioeconomic mix, living side-by-side on her block.

But what Lewis remembers most vividly is Roxboro Junior High School, which she describes as “elegant, sophisticated and an intense intellectual environment. Even now, looking back at all the places I’ve studied, Roxboro Junior High is probably the best school I’ve ever been to.”

By the time she attended Cleveland Heights High School in the late 1940s, the district was bursting at the seams and mulling the idea of adding a second building. When the powers that be realized this would result in one Italian school and one Jewish school, an early commitment to integration and diversity led them to renovate the current building instead.

Lewis recalls a happy, post-war atmosphere in the school, where she served as editor of the Black & Gold newspaper. After graduating from the University of Michigan in 1955 with degrees in English and Art History, Lewis moved to New York City, lured by the excitement of the big city. Fast forward a few years, and she was back in Cleveland Heights, newly married to a widower with three teenage sons, with her own twin daughters on the way. “In the space of about two years, I went from being a single professional woman in New York to a suburban mother of five.”

While leaving New York was hard, the choice of living in Cleveland Heights was a no-brainer. “It had a sense of history and diversity that made it very real to me,” she said of the city she still calls home. Much had changed from the days of her youth when streetcars ran up and down Fairmount Boulevard, but when Mac the Milkman, who had delivered her family’s milk throughout her childhood, showed up at her new home, “it was an extension of the neighborhood I’d always lived in.”

When her boys were at Heights High and her girls at Roxboro Elementary, the family took a year-long



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trip to Greece, inspired by her husband Robert’s interest in Greek mythology. Her then six-year old Clea wrote frequent letters back to her first grade class in Cleveland Heights detailing their every adventure. She finally received a reply from her teacher: “The children are enjoying your letters. Please don’t be sad that they haven’t responded but they don’t yet know how to write.”

Lewis, however, did know how to write and, in the 1970s and 80s, she authored four books on local history. Her life’s work, however, really came to fruition at Cuyahoga Community College, where Robert was a founding board member. In 1985, she founded the Nuclear Age Resource Center, a

non-profit housed at Tri-C’s eastern campus, focused on educating the public about the dangers of the nuclear arms race, and how to oppose it and advocate for peace.

When the Cold War came to a dramatic close, the Center’s focus shifted to being “a clearinghouse for non-partisan facts and truths. If you don’t have information, how can you have an opinion?”

Now named the Global Issues Resource Center, it became a reliable source for educators of a wide variety of topics, from environmental sustainability to cultivating a culture of tolerance within buildings.

Following the Columbine shooting in 1999, the Center narrowed in and became a trusted expert on addressing and preventing school violence. “We really came full circle,” she said, “from pushing for peace on the global stage to pushing for peace in individual classrooms.”

“My 20 years of work there were driven by the idea that an informed citizenry is the basis of a democratic society.”

Following her retirement and the death of her husband, Lewis founded Tri-C’s Robert L. Lewis Academy of Scholars, which recently celebrated its 10th anniversary. She continues to advise both scholars and professors in the program, which helps students pair social justice philosophies to real world applications.

“They’re basically designing their own projects on how to save the world.” Much like Joanne Lewis has always done. 🍷