

# Even Without Founder, Big Hopes Lie Ahead at Shawnee Community Services

BY RICK HELLMAN

*Special to The Star*

It won't be the same without Evelyn VanKemseke at Shawnee Community Services. After all, she founded the charitable organization in 1982 and spent six days a week there ever since, right up until a few days before she died of cancer last month at age 87.

But with two of her daughters on staff, a committed board of directors and goodwill built up over 33 years, Shawnee Community Services will soldier on, offering bread, clothing, help and hope to the less fortunate.

"She was a very strong-willed person in her belief that we should do everything we can for people who are destitute or homeless, and she did it without ever taking a salary," said board chairman Jim Sheeley, a retired lawyer.

Insurance agent John Mills, another longtime supporter, said VanKemseke "gave every ounce of energy she had to help people in need."

"She grew up poor," Mills said. "She had to lick things off the plate and go to bed hungry. She said 'If I can help a person not have to go through what I went through, that's what I'm going to do.'"

VanKemseke's litany of good deeds won't soon be forgotten in Shawnee. She helped to form the Shawnee Safety Council, which pushed city and school district officials to install sidewalks and crossing guards around town, and the Johnson County Christmas Bureau, which enables poor people to provide Christmas gifts for their families. She was a stalwart member of the St. Joseph Catholic Church and Shawnee's Rotary and Kiwanis clubs. Her portrait is the only woman's featured in a mural of historic leaders on a wall at City Hall.

But Shawnee Community Services is her ultimate legacy.

When Lenexa established its first community center in 1981, VanKemseke decided Shawnee should have one, too.

Daughter Sylvia Terry, now the executive director of Shawnee Community Services, explains.

"She found a property at Johnson Drive and Pflumm ... got 10 families to cosign the mortgage and started the Community Center of Shawnee," Terry said. "One of her goals was to connect seniors with latchkey kids, so she had free after-school programs. She climbed trees and played in the woods with the kids. It was on the edge of the city then. There were a lot of activities like the Jaycees Haunted House and Teen Town to get kids off the streets on Friday nights."

"It was a safe place to go, no matter what school you went to," said VanKemseke's other daughter on the staff of Shawnee Community Services, Volunteer Coordinator Marlisa VanKemseke.

The distribution of free food items, which continues today, began there with donations of day-old bread from a local grocery store.

It was hardly a grand edifice, though.



"We affectionately referred to it as The Rat Farm because they used to raise lab rats there," Terry said.

By 1989, Evelyn VanKemseke was looking for a better place. In that year, Shawnee residents passed a bond issue, and part of the proceeds went to the city's purchase of the old Shawnee Community Services property.

"They assumed the mortgage," Terry said. "But they didn't want to do the charity part. They wanted to concentrate on the recreation part and hosting meetings, and so we came over here."

"Here" was a 2,300-square-foot former QuikTrip building at 11110 W. 67th St.

"We did free bread, free shoes, aerobics classes," Terry said. Donated household items are sold in its thrift shop to help fund the organization.

"A lot of people assumed we were part of the city," Terry said. "We do collaborate with civic organizations and churches to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Evelyn was all about helping people today, not making them wait two weeks and then telling them you can't help them. If they have some security, they'll be able to take the paycheck from their jobs and pay their utility bills and provide for their families."

Shawnee's Deputy City Manager Vicky Charlesworth is a member of Shawnee Community Services' board of directors and says city officials often refer people to the charity.

"The city can't always use taxpayers' money to help, but we could always send somebody to Evelyn, and she'd be willing to help," Charlesworth said.

Shawnee Community Services has no income or residency requirements. Evelyn VanKemseke's gut instincts and obvious commitment were enough to convince supporters that their donations to the group were being well-spent.

Three years ago, after a long fundraising campaign, Shawnee Community Services dedicated a new building on the site of the former convenience store.

Ernie Straub, president of Straub Construction Inc., first met Evelyn VanKemseke a decade ago, when she was trying to raise money to build the new building.

"I couldn't believe what she was doing out of the building that was falling down around her," Straub said. "It changed my life. I saw the burden she was struggling with and became committed to helping her get a new building built. I have never seen anybody so determined; so focused. That was her life for the last 33 years. She was a treasure for Shawnee."

Straub, Sheeley and others say Shawnee Community Services will continue its good works, even without Evelyn VanKemseke there to oversee them.

"She's smart," Straub said. "She's got that set up with the legacy of her family to be better and bigger and do more in her absence. She set the ground for the organization to flourish, even without her. I'm excited about the future. I don't think they'll miss a beat."