



Gratz Insider, Summer 2016 - Story Continuation

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A Spirited Benefactor Gives Gratz a 'Transformational Gift'

Berenice Victoria Abrams, or “Bernie,” to those who knew her best, was born in 1918 during World War I, and died in 2014 when the White House was occupied by the first African-American president of the United States. Abrams witnessed many changes during her 96 years, but always managed to keep up with the times - and even, to stay a few steps ahead.

Small in stature, “Bernie was a little person with a big personality and a strong voice,” says Susan Thomas, a cousin by marriage.

In 1936, Abrams graduated from the supplementary high school program at Gratz. She earned her undergraduate degree at the University of Pennsylvania and stayed on to pursue graduate studies in social work.

Known for her brisket, her baking and her Chanukah parties, Abrams was a master in the kitchen, passing down cookbooks fully annotated with her comments and instructions. However, rather than taking a traditional path, she entered the workforce, traveled often for both business and pleasure and never married. She worked as a social worker for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in positions that connected with Head Start and Sesame Street during the early years of these programs. She also developed a keen interest in stock trading, visiting her brokers multiple times per week, and even following her stocks online when she was in her 90s.

After she retired, Abrams turned her attention to Jewish causes and activities, including Hadassah, and the Brandeis University National Women’s Committee. In her later years, she also devoted much time to HAZAAC, a seniors group at Har Zion, the temple that her grandfather had helped found. Even in her 90s, when she was older than most of the “guests” of HAZAAC, Abrams spent countless hours preparing home-cooked meals for the group. As her friend Joyce Rhode explained matter-of-factly, “We shopped on Monday, cooked on Tuesday and served on Wednesday.”

Self-reliant, strong-willed and direct, Abrams prided herself on her independence, as family anecdotes make clear. In fact, she refused to move out of her apartment until circumstances precipitated her departure. One night, a fire broke out on the floor below her, damaging her unit and forcing her to evacuate - by walking down 15 flights of steps, barefoot and in her mid-80s. When she finally moved to a retirement community, she remained in independent living until only a few months before her death.

Through the years, Abrams did not maintain an active and ongoing relationship with Gratz College. However, according to Susan Thomas, Abrams believed “that creative and accessible Jewish education could help to cement people’s Jewish identity and play a significant role in Jewish continuity.” In addition to valuing Jewish education, Abrams wanted to memorialize her parents. The result was the

The Benjamin and Dorothy Abrams Scholarship Fund at Gratz, which will make Gratz College scholarships available to teachers working in the field of Jewish education.

Articulating the significance of this gift to the College, Gratz President Joy Goldstein said, “This transformational gift is the largest in the history of Gratz College and will support generations of students as they pursue their educational goals. We are so grateful for Berenice Abrams’ visionary generosity in establishing this scholarship fund.”