

Tennala Gross Leadership Fund Established to Honor Great Leadership and Mentoring.

Mabel Tennala Abner Gross, 92, of Burlington, North Carolina died Wednesday, February 18, 2009.

The Tennala Gross Leadership Fund has been established by Becky Mock in recognition of Tennala's years of leadership, inspiration and mentoring of women. Tennala was a founding member and Board of Director Emirita at the Women's Resource Center in Alamance County.



The purpose of the fund is to identify and award women that exhibit leadership in our community. This award will be given annually by the Women's Resource Center to encourage the next generation of leaders to follow in Tennala's footsteps. Contributions may be made online on the Women's Resource Center website at <http://www.wrcac.org/donate.asp> by clicking on the donate button or mailed to the WRC at 411-B Fifth Street, Burlington, NC 27215.

Known to all as "T", she was the widow of Dr. Dawyer D. "Jack" Gross, her husband of 64 years. She is survived by John Gross, her only child, and grandchildren, Kelly Williams and Jeremy Gross. "T" will be remembered as a loving Mother, devoted Grandmother, and wonderful "Aunt T" to many younger relatives.

"T" grew up as the oldest of four children of hardworking parents, Mabel Eliza Hall and John Henry Abner. The family moved every year until her senior year in high school. Immediately after graduating at sixteen, she went to work and six years later was able to begin attending Campbell Junior College. To pay for her final two years at Elon College, she worked in a local textile mill. Following graduation from Elon College, she married her college sweetheart, a Baptist minister. They moved to the North Carolina mountain towns of Clyde and later to Marshall, where her only child was born. Her positive outlook, tenacity, attention to detail, and sense of humor made her a much-appreciated leader, but a rather unconventional minister's wife. Their efforts to open the doors of the church to their African-American neighbors were not well received.

The family moved to Greenville in 1960 where her husband joined the faculty of East Carolina University and she began teaching high school. She completed a master's degree in mathematics and began teaching math and computer science at ECU. While at ECU, she became aware that the salaries paid female faculty was not equal to those of the male faculty. At some risk to her career, she and her husband collected data on faculty salaries and shared it with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The EEOC had been interested in launching an examination of suspected inequities, but were restricted from launching such an investigation without a request from a staff person. The subsequent examination of faculty salaries resulted in a raise for many of the women who had been paid much less than the men. This all happened in the early 1960's, many years before equal pay for work of comparable worth was viewed as a matter of justice and equal opportunity.

Tennala spent most of her adult life as a grassroots advocate, bringing women of different races, ages, educational levels, and socio-economic backgrounds together to work for common goals and the good of the community. Her diligence drew many uninvolved women and men into political and social activism. Her "behind the scenes" accomplishments include years of mentoring younger women and providing them with the financial assistance and transportation necessary to attend advocacy workshops, empowerment sessions, and important activist events.

One of the women she mentored was Becky Mock. Becky credits Tennala with "changing her life" by showing her how to become a leader and advocate for social justice. With wit and enthusiasm, "T" devoted countless hours to educating and encouraging people to work together to bring equality, peace and understanding to the world. She worked diligently on women's issues, promoting the appointment of

accomplished women for service on local and state boards and commissions and for the election of women to office at the local, state and national levels. She spent endless hours researching and writing nominations to highlight the good works of others. Her efforts were carried out with infinite patience and hard work, yet tempered with good humor. She was truly one of a kind and her work to improve the lives of women made a difference for women in our community and across North Carolina.

Tennala devoted numerous hours and all her energy to promoting women her entire life. She often said, "It doesn't matter who gets the credit, just so the job gets done". Her efforts were often overlooked. She was never one to seek recognition, but her behind-the-scenes work was often critical for the success of many local as well as state projects. When the campaign to pass the Equal Rights Amendment was going on, "T" organized and maintained a database of thousands of names for a mail list at a time when computer lists were rare. Her work helped establish the statewide network of women advocating for the ERA.

Tennala was a leader in the establishment of several organizations focusing on improving the lives of women: the North Carolina Women's Political Caucus, the Alamance Women's Political Caucus, the Women's Forum of North Carolina, and the Women's Resource Center in Alamance County. She wrote numerous letters to the editor to challenge racist, sexist, or mean-spirited opinions on a range of social justice issues in local and state newspapers, at some risk to her own personal safety.

Tennala opened opportunities for women at the local, state and national level. Her personal mentoring of young women, her work on behalf of equal pay for equal work, and her outspoken leadership in all areas of improving people's situations made a difference and increased opportunities for women. Her work improved the quality of life in our local community and allowed many others to lead more productive, healthier, happier lives.

Tennala's Career Background

- Educator: Taught in the public schools of North Carolina 1943-48, 1956-63.
- Taught mathematics at ECU 1964-1981; specializing in Computer Service.
- Chaired the committee choosing the course of study for the first Computer Science degree offered at ECU. Taught many of the courses and served as Director of the Computing Center for many years.
- Instrumental in bringing about an equalization of salaries between female and male faculty.

Education

- Campbell Junior College, AA
- Elon College, BA - Majors in English and History, Minor in French
- East Carolina University, MA in Mathematics
- Further study: UNC-Chapel Hill, N.C. State University, University of Chicago

Special Awards Received:

- **NC Equity** - 1995 Carpathian Award for Personal Advocacy
- **N. C. Women's Political Caucus** - 1997 Award of Appreciation for significant contributions on behalf of women statewide.

Leadership

- **Women's Resource Center in Alamance County.** Charter member and Board of Director Emerita
- **NC Women's Political Caucus:** Charter member, State President in 1976, PAC Treasurer -1991, Policy Council (Board of Directors) member for several years
- Organized the **Alamance Women's Political Caucus** in 1982. First President. Held numerous AWPC offices and organized many projects over the years. Designed, organized and moderated the first **Alamance County Candidates Forum.**

- **Democratic Women of Alamance County:** President for two terms - 1991-1992.
- **Women's Division of the Alamance County Chamber of Commerce** - Served on Board of Directors
- **Women's Forum of North Carolina:** Charter member and served on Board of Directors.
- **NOW Woman of the Year**, 1980, Greenville, NC Chapter.
- **1977 Women's Conference Planning Committee** and delegate to the **National Women's Conference**, Houston, Texas, 1977.
- Member of **Alamance County Human Relations Council**, **American Association of University Women**, **Delta Kappa Gamma** (Honorary sorority of women educators- member since 1958), **Peacemakers of Alamance County**, and the **Sierra Club**.
- **Author of winning nominations** honoring outstanding women and promoting young women:
 - ▲ Distinguished Woman of North Carolina Award Winners:
 - Nursing Pioneer **Elizabeth Scott Carrington** (1985)
 - N. C. House Representative **Bertha "B" Holt** (1991)
 - ▲ Women's Forum: First Young Adult Leadership Award (YALA): **Robin Hadley** (1987)
 - ▲ Women's Forum: Nominated **Joe Ciriano** as the first male nominee for the YALA (1995)
 - ▲ Nominated: **Rachel Esposito** for an internship at Democratic National Headquarters, a position reserved for young women ages 18 to 25. Esposito was awarded the internship, represented the Democratic Women of North Carolina at the 1997 Convention of the National Federation of Democratic Women and served at the National Democratic Headquarters during July 1997.

The Tennala Gross Leadership Fund will focus on identifying and awarding women that exhibit leadership in our community. Tennala would be pleased to know the women she mentored are following in her footsteps by encouraging a new generation of leadership working to improve the lives of women.

Submitted by Becky Mock
March 25, 2009