



MERRILL PALMER SKILLMAN INSTITUTE
for Child & Family Development

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MPSI REPORT

GIVING



Lydia Easley in MPI playground (1943)

Long History with MPSI Spurs Generous Gift to Early Childhood Center

by Cheryl Deep

James and Lydia Easley often stopped by the Freer House to catch up on MPSI activities whenever they were in town. Though they had long lived in Washington, a piece of their hearts stayed near Ferry Street in Detroit where they grew up and went to school – though they didn’t know each other then. “We were both fortunate to participate in the Merrill Palmer programs in our early years and learned that our paths must have crossed at that time,” Jim, a retired dentist, said recently. “These memories along with the stories we heard on our many visits over the years have shown us the commitment Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute has made to the children of Detroit.”

When Lydia passed away in May, Jim donated a substantial gift in her memory as a children’s enrichment fund for the Early Childhood Center to help pay for field trips, informational speakers and educational tools that represent diverse cultural backgrounds. “Merrill Palmer always held a special place in Lydia’s heart, and we both believed very strongly in the Institute’s mission to promote the well-being of children and families,” Jim said.

Lydia Easley spent her first 12 years in the Hecker-Tierney House, the turreted mansion at the corner of Woodward Avenue and Ferry Street and next door to the Freer House. Back then it was a boarding house for 65 residents run by her parents. She attended MPI’s nursery school starting at age 2, and not primarily because it was convenient. “My mother knew it was very highly thought of,” Lydia said during a visit a few years ago. “The school was involved with mother and daddy right from when I was born.” Her developmental stages at MPI were immortalized as a case study in a 1959 book chapter on General Principles of Development. Lydia’s mom also appreciated the school’s emphasis on play as a foundation of learning. She erected a tent behind the mansion as a playhouse for little Lydia and her Merrill Palmer friends.

Since Lydia was the only child of older parents, she loved socializing with other children. As she got older, she occasionally attended the Merrill Palmer after-school club. Jim spotted Lydia once at the club -- and fell for her immediately. He watched her leave the club, walk up the block, and enter the “castle house.” They had never introduced themselves. Many years later, Lydia was studying nursing at the University of Michigan and Jim was going to dental school. Friends matched them up and they eventually realized their remarkable Merrill Palmer connection.

That blind date led to a long, happy marriage, a son and daughter and several grandchildren. For much of his life, Jim has enjoyed building miniature historic exhibits and model trains, winning awards for his replicas. Lydia eventually shared his passion. Sixteen years ago, they started a garden railway at their Emerald Heights Retirement Community now maintained by more than a hundred members, who also grieve the loss of their close friend. “I know Lydia is in a better place,” Jim said, “but I certainly do miss her. This Merrill Palmer gift for kids would really make her smile.”



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