

COURTNEY ANN GRAHAM DONNELL



Art and advocacy were the themes that defined the life of Courtney Ann Graham Donnell. Art curator, advocate for people with disabilities, and devoted alumna of Wellesley College, Donnell died September 27th at Northwestern Memorial Hospital from complications of multiple sclerosis at the age of 72.

Wellesley College was an important influence throughout Donnell's life. She earned her BA in Art History in 1967 and continued to be an active alumna. She served in various positions, as member of the Wellesley Club of Chicago, alumnae class president, founding chair of the Chicago Friends of Art supporting the college's Davis Museum, and national board member of the Wellesley College Alumnae Association.

After graduation, Donnell earned her Masters in Architectural History at the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU and worked at the Serge Sabarsky Gallery in New York. Moving to Chicago in 1974 with her then husband Bill Donnell, she was hired as a curatorial research assistant at the Art Institute of Chicago. Embracing Chicago's architectural heritage, she was an early docent for the Chicago Architecture Foundation. Over the next thirty years she rose to the position of Associate Curator in the Art Institute's Department of 20th Century Painting and Sculpture. Coincidentally, Donnell's ancestor was American artist, John H. Drury, a member of the Chicago Academy of Design, a predecessor of the Art Institute.

Highly regarded for her special talent for meticulous research, she never left a stone unturned when gathering documentation on artworks by major figures of the modern and contemporary periods. She was widely recognized for organizing and writing the accompanying catalogue for the 1997 retrospective exhibition of Chicago's own Ivan Albright, which traveled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York after its presentation at the Art Institute.

Her colleague at the time, Neal Benezra, now Director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, remembers, "Courtney Donnell was a longtime, valued and incredibly dedicated member of the Art Institute of Chicago curatorial team. Her

dedication to the collection of modern art was unflagging and passionate. Well-loved and respected by all her colleagues over the course of many years at the Institute, Courtney will be missed by all who knew her.”

Fellow curator at the time and now Pritzker Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Madeleine Grynsztejn recalls, “In health as in her curatorial career, Courtney was indomitable. I especially admired her thorough research on Ivan Albright and the scholarly and handsome Art Institute exhibition that followed from her dedication to this artist. Courtney was a calm and supportive colleague who was on the other hand fiercely impassioned about her right to physically access the art experience that moved her deeply.”

Donnell generously shared her expertise. Lady Valerie Solti, widow of CSO artistic director Sir Georg Solti, recalled, “She took us in before hours so Gyuri could see the Impressionists and introduced us to American Gothic, she made us aware of Urban Conservation in the Middle West. Despite the physical restriction of her life she continued to be a life enhancer.”

Through her Wellesley classmate Ginny Neel, (later daughter-in-law of noted 20th century American Artist Alice Neel), she was responsible for the Art Institute of Chicago’s acquisition of the painting by Alice Neel titled “Ginny in the Yellow Hat.” In 2003, Donnell wrote the catalogue essay for the show of Alice Neel drawings at The Arts Club of Chicago. She was also a frequent contributor to the Bulletin of the Art Institute and contributed to the 1988 publication Master Paintings in The Art Institute of Chicago.

Donnell dealt for many years with multiple sclerosis (MS). While confined to a motorized scooter later in life, she continued to work tirelessly through the nonprofit organization Access Living to help others with disabilities live active and full lives.

“Courtney was a passionate advocate for inclusion and for Access Living. She chaired our Gala committee and served on our board off and on for over 12 years. She had a great talent for connecting people to our mission. She cared deeply about breaking down barriers so people with disabilities could enjoy all that this great city has to offer, especially in the Arts,” said Marca Bristo, President and CEO, Access Chicago.

Donnell attended high school at the Oxford School for Girls in West Hartford, CT. For her class’s 40th anniversary, her class officers launched a campaign to raise \$20,000 to honor her by establishing an art scholarship. Her classmate Rena Koopman recalled, “After graduation, she had served for many years as Class Secretary. It was her warmth and determination that kept us together and we all knew it. We were a mule-headed group with divergent opinions about almost everything, but we all loved Courtney. I felt confident I could exceed the school’s request for \$20,000.” \$63,000 was raised with 99.9% class participation.

Donnell's life was greatly enriched by her personal assistant for over 15 years, Primo Przybylski, who made it possible for her to continue her many activities and live independently.

She is survived by her brother John Graham of Biddleford, Maine; three first cousins, James Fairman in Florida; Robert Fairman in New Hampshire, and Radah Gaines in New York; and her former husband, Bill Donnell of Chicago.

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