

'Fearless' woman began school, helped the elderly

Janet Jacobs, American-Statesman Staff

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It was in the early 1980s that Inez Jeffery found herself and 75 tourist schoolteachers under house arrest in a hotel in Moscow because of an unpaid voucher. Her daughter, Jan Harris, remembers peering into the room where her mother was being interrogated by three Russian bureaucrats. "And then a KGB officer walked in and pointed a finger right in her face and said, 'You, in that chair.' I'd have shot like a bullet into that chair, but she just stayed right where she was," Harris said. Within 20 minutes, Jeffery and her tour group were free to continue their trip. "The woman didn't fear anything, and nothing ever slowed her down," Harris said.

Inez Jeffery, educator, traveler, writer and American-Statesman columnist, died Monday. She was 88.

Jeffery's professional life began when her husband, an FBI agent, died in 1945, leaving her with three young children to raise. Overcoming prejudices and others' doubts, she got a loan and opened the Jeffery School for children ages 2 to 6.

The school, known for using innovative teaching techniques as well as conducting research in early education, operated in Austin for 37 years.

It attracted attention because Jeffery's theory was that children must be taught such skills as violin playing and foreign languages before learning to read.

Former Austin City Council Member Ronney Reynolds attended the school as a child and took his children there, too.

"She was forward-thinking," Reynolds said. "She had timeout before people knew what timeout was.

"She was a very unique individual -- very determined, somewhat outspoken and very committed to what she wanted to do."

Jeffery was still a relatively young woman when she began writing a weekly column for the American-Statesman on senior issues. "Inez Says" ran from 1964 to 1982.

"She was just a beacon of light for senior citizens in this community for so many years," said Liz Carpenter, an author and speechwriter. "She was a rallying voice of encouragement and services that are needed."

Her knowledge extended to senior and children's issues, and she was deeply involved in helping write legislation for both, said former U.S. Rep. Jake Pickle, D-Austin.

"Inez Jeffery was a jewel among the social and welfare leaders. She knew the law and the rules that go with the legislation because she helped write the law," he said. "If a program wasn't working right, they'd hear from Inez Jeffery."

It was through Delta Kappa Gamma, a teachers' honor society, that Jeffery began leading trips overseas. Austin lawyer Sarah Weddington worked as an assistant to Jeffery on those trips in the early '80s.

"Inez was one of those towering women who never agreed to do what was expected of her," Weddington said.

"I think what she liked best was the intellectual curiosity," she said. "You took women who had never traveled, or at least not very far, and you had them meet with educators in other countries."

In comparing experiences, the teachers took more than pictures and souvenirs back to their classrooms, Weddington said.

In the '90s, Jeffery wrote a book about a woman she had met on her travels; the woman had been a translator for Soviet and American world leaders. "Inside Russia, the Life and Times of Zoya Zarubina" was published in 1999.

Besides her daughter, Jeffery is survived by two sons, Jim Jeffery of Harbor City, Calif., and John Jeffery of Fort Worth, and a sister, Dorothy Romeo of Coleman.

A memorial service is scheduled for 3 p.m. Friday at Weed-Corley- Fish Funeral Home, 3125 N. Lamar Blvd.

COLOR PHOTO; Photo: Inez Jeffery: Educator wrote column for American-Statesman on senior issues. Inez C. Jeffery - 1913--2001

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