

Urban planning expert Doris Holleb dies at 93

By Bob Goldsborough, Chicago Tribune Sep 23, 2016



Urban planning expert Doris Holleb taught for almost three decades at the University of Chicago. (Handout)

An urban planning expert, Doris B. Holleb taught geographical studies and social sciences at the University of Chicago for almost three decades and also served on the Chicago Plan Commission for 30 years.

"She was extremely cultured, with a delicious sense of humor," said Newton Minow, a former Federal Communications Commission chairman who along with his wife was longtime friends with Holleb and her late husband, Marshall. "She was an exceptionally intelligent person who was very well read and very artistic."

Holleb, 93, died of congestive heart failure Sept. 4 at her Lincoln Park home, her son Paul said. The longtime Lincoln Park resident had been ill for some time, her son said.

Born Doris Bernstein in New York, Holleb graduated from high school at 15 and then earned an undergraduate degree from Hunter College in Manhattan.

After college, Holleb moved to Washington, D.C., and took a job working at the Federal Reserve. While there, she met her future husband of 64 years, Marshall, who went on to become a prominent real estate attorney in Chicago. They married in 1944. He died in 2008.

After Marshall Holleb was discharged from the Army, the couple moved to Cambridge, Mass., where Doris earned a master's degree in economics from Harvard University. The couple then moved to Chicago, where Doris raised three sons before taking a job teaching at the University of Chicago in 1966.

Holleb started in the university's geography department, which later was renamed the Committee on Geographical Studies. U. of C. geography professor Michael Conzen, who chairs the committee, recalled Holleb's popularity with students and also her keen interest in urban affairs.

"She was trained as an economist, but her long-term interests were in housing policy, and her interest in housing then broadened, with the realization that geographies are very closely allied with planners and that planners often come out of the academic field of geography," Conzen said. "That helped strengthen the links she had with us, and it was mutual because from our point of view, the urban planning that she spoke about was not just theory but also the link to the political realities of how cities are run and what you have to do to get things done."

Conzen also characterized Holleb's personality as "warm, engaged, energetic and sympathetic, but always with a sense of her own point of view."

"She was not afraid to express (her opinion)," Conzen said.

Retired U. of C. history professor Neil Harris, a longtime friend, said Holleb and her husband were "urban-oriented people when the future of cities was not what it is today.

"Doris was connected to, interested in and supportive of all the institutions that make a city important," Harris said. "She was at a lot of places a lot of times."

In 1986, Mayor Harold Washington appointed Holleb to the Chicago Plan Commission, a panel she served on until her death.

"She loved being on the Plan Commission," Paul Holleb said. "She loved the development of Chicago and the progress of Chicago, and she loved to apply academics and information to the process, and she did her best to convey the public trust in this manner."

Chicago Plan Commission Vice Chairwoman Smita Shah called Holleb "gracious and kind," recalling how Holleb went out of her way to help Shah when she joined the panel.

"The one thing I consistently noticed about her, whether we were reviewing something that was controversial or otherwise, was that she always had the ability to see the big picture," Shah said. "She would ask about architecture and ask about requirements, but then she would always talk about the community," including how a plan would make a difference to children or ethnic communities, she said. "She was always very thoughtful."

Outside of her work on the Plan Commission, Holleb maintained a busy calendar, serving on a variety of committees and boards. She served on the boards of the Field Museum and the Metropolitan Institute. At the national level, President Jimmy Carter in 1980 appointed her to serve on the board of the Inter-American Foundation, and President Bill Clinton in 1996 appointed her to serve on the National Council on the Humanities.

Holleb and her husband had a particular affinity for Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, on whose board she also served. Her husband served as the longtime general counsel for the museum, and he worked to deploy his legal acumen in the 1990s to acquire the site of an old National Guard armory for the MCA's new building on East Chicago Avenue. And the couple were longtime collectors of contemporary art.

"Doris had the will and the temperament — like many of the people of her generation who were interested in contemporary art — that made the new museum building on Chicago Avenue possible," said former MCA CEO Kevin Consey. "She and her husband were great collectors and supporters ... emotionally, financially and spiritually of the museum, and they were part of the glue that held the institution together."

Holleb also chaired the educational counsel at Francis W. Parker School in Lincoln Park for many years and served as an honorary trustee.

"She was a combination of a smart, engaged, generous and a real leader and mentor to me," said Dan Frank, the school's principal. "She had this precision of thought that would lead to nuance and could differentiate one issue from another. I was not a classroom student of hers ever, but was a student of hers about life and learning and education here at Francis Parker as an administrator and teacher and principal. In that way, yes, she taught me an awful lot."

Holleb is also survived by two other sons, Alan and Gordon, and five grandchildren.