

Idanelle McMurry

MS. FORD: The next person we'd like to remember is Idanelle McMurry.

Although she had been in declining health for several years, it was a shock to learn of the death at age 84 of Idanelle McMurry on October 29, 2009, following a stroke. Only this year, she had put her house in Nashville on the market, where she and her beloved dachshund, Heidi, lived for so many years, and had moved to an assisted living community in her hometown of Cookeville, Tennessee. Named Idanelle, she was known as Sam or Miss McMurry to many.

Born in Morganfield, Kentucky, and reared in Cookeville, Miss McMurry was a 1943 graduate of the Ward-Belmont School and also of Vanderbilt University where she received her BA, graduating Phi Beta Kappa, and subsequently her MA degree. She taught English at Abbot Academy, Burnham-by-the-Sea, Hockaday, and Kinkaid.

In 1963 Miss McMurry returned to Nashville to head Harpeth Hall following the retirement of its founder. At Harpeth Hall, she established a development program that funded a library, middle school, and an art and athletic center. Along with her outstanding faculty, she worked to enhance an already strong academic program focusing on athletics and art as value-added benefits.

In 1973 she introduced Winterim, a three-week program for freshmen and sophomores involving intensive study on campus, internships in several cities, or academic travel abroad. Thirty-seven years later, the Winterim program thrives and continues to be a signature program at Harpeth Hall.

Miss McMurry brought national recognition to the school through key leadership roles to which she was elected, including being first woman chair of the NAIS board, first woman chair of the Secondary Commission of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and president of the National Association of Principals of Schools for Girls. Miss McMurry was also the first woman elected to membership in the previously all-male Headmasters Association.

Following her tenure at Harpeth Hall, Miss McMurry served as headmistress of the Hockaday School in Dallas for ten years. Upon her return to Nashville, she joined the Education Group in Dallas as a search consultant.

Despite all her impressive leadership positions, her signature gift was her incomparable ability to make friends with her students, alumnae, and colleagues. Leah Rhys, head of Harpeth Hall at a later time, said of Miss McMurry, whom she called Sam, "Sam was a towering figure for her students from the beginning. A Harpeth Hall alumna entering as a freshman two years after Sam's term began (of course, she thought Sam had been there forever), told me her classmates decided Sam wore high-heeled pumps every day because by then she couldn't get her heels to go down. Only years later did the alumna realize that Sam couldn't have been the force she was on the tennis courts and golf course with her heels up!

"But the strong presence Sam projected didn't prevent her from making profound and lasting friendships with some of her students in those early days. Those alumnae remained her close friends, through the Texas years, and after her return to Nashville. During the last few years, these women were Sam's cheerleaders and supporters, helping to make decisions and easing the inevitable transitions."

Sam left many admirers and an extended family. Amy Grant, Harpeth Hall class of 1978 and Grammy Award winner, credited Sam with discovering her at a Harpeth Hall assembly. Sam requested that Amy sing at her memorial service, which was to be held at Harpeth Hall in the theatre of the Idanelle McMurry Arts and Athletic Center on November 22, 2009.

These remarks were written by Anne Teaff, with the help of Leah Rhys, Nic Pollard, and Blair Stambaugh.