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Autobiographical Statement, Hollins 50th Reunion

Mildred Emory Persinger

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Mildred EMORY Persinger
26 Judson Av, Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522

From: HOLLINS
50th Reunion --- 1989

The pace of these fifty years has been like putting out fires. Writing this is another hectic effort to meet a deadline long past. I wish for space to explain why I owe Hollins much; Dick more.

After Hollins, serious graduate study and teaching philosophy at Auburn U. ended with marriage and a move to New York. Academia, even at Columbia (sitting next to a future Hollins president) lost its luster beside the Big Apple's broader blandishments. Dozens of national organizations headquartered in the city were working on agendas that were mine, too. Jobs galore were crying to be done, as long as no salary was required. Unbeknownst to me, some Hollins faculty had written letters that propelled me into contacts with movers and shakers who needed help they could not pay for.

Thus began a career of learning by doing. Finding myself on boards of organizations that wielded the power of hundreds of thousands of members, three million in the YWCA, I had to learn some things Hollins never taught me: lines of communication and responsibility in complex administrations; setting up committees and coalitions; writing and delivering speeches, Congressional testimony and press interviews; protocol; how to enlighten VIPs while showing proper respect; the names, locations and flags of postwar countries and something of their problems; organizing seminars and conferences with multinational participation; working the political system, both national and world-wide.

What luck, to be living in the U.S. in an era when the citizen had access to government at every level, when the clarity of hindsight was producing creative solutions to international problems and when Americans' habit of organizing voluntarily to meet public needs was in its heyday! In the forties, my "war work" had been with European refugees, with groups protesting the internment of Japanese Americans, pressing for integration of the armed forces and fair employment in industries with military contracts; even for help to school districts where enrollments were swollen with "army brats;" then the big push to assure acceptance of the United Nations.

For three subsequent decades we conducted education and information activities through organizations and the media, lobbying Congress on a whole array of civil rights, civil liberties and international issues. Colleagues in these efforts and I battled the White House, "boll weavils" and McCarthy in the Senate, the House UN-American Activities Committee, the AMA and later the NRA. We demonstrated, we carried our message to national political and other conventions, even to the Oval Office. We mounted huge national and world meetings to bring issues of racism, environment, population, the waste of women's abilities, homelessness and war to public attention. There were deep encounters with thousands of co-workers, some in lofty places; others fresh from the fields.

These efforts have taken me to every geographic region and rewarded me with a global circle of friends. As page-end looms, there is no space for the high moments and none to drop the names of our three children or of some of the world's great with whom I was privileged to be a junior partner in the quest to make a difference...

Mildred Emory Persinger