

# Remembering Aileen Lau

MOVER, SHAKER WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN BRINGING ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT TO TOWN



Aileen Lau organized a town wide meeting in January 1975 that led to the founding of Gateway Players Theater.



At her desk in the Quinebaug Valley Council for the Arts and Humanities, Lau served as Gateway's first president – and frequent director and producer of shows.

Courtesy photos



Aileen Lau Dickinson (front row, with booklet in hand) returned to town for an "Olde Gateway" reunion in 2002.



Jan Whitney, left, Ed Lau, and Andy Black helped with the sets and scenery for "Anything Goes" back in 1975.

BY MARK ASHTON  
NEWS STAFF WRITER

SOUTHBRIDGE — Anyone who ever met Aileen Lau knows how instrumental she was in bringing the arts scene to life in Southbridge. With her husband, Ed, president of the Optical Division of the American Optical Co. at the time, she arrived in the Tri-Community about 1974 and – during the next four years – organized theatrical, musical, and other arts-related ventures into what remain vital today as the Quinebaug Valley Council on the Arts and Humanities and Gateway Players.

Not just a behind-the-scenes organizer and delegator, however, she was an orchestrator, at the forefront of whatever project she envisioned. In addition to direct-

ing, producing, and spearheading the first few productions for Gateway Players Theatre (now in its 39th year of community theater), she was also active in cleaning, restoration, and beautification projects that ultimately resulted in Southbridge's being named an All America City about 35 years ago.

"Aileen was strong and so determined," says Elaine Black, a fellow arts mentor and good friend of Lau (now Dr. Aileen Lau Dickinson), who passed away last week in West Columbia, South Carolina, at the age of 88. "I think it's important that we remember her – and thank her for all that she meant to this town."

Black is one of dozens – if not hundreds – of local resi-

dents touched by Lau's enthusiasm, energy, and enabling spirit. She and Ed "were an inspiration to the community," says Black. "She got to Southbridge (the couple lived on Fiske Hill in Sturbridge) and said, 'What – no theater here? We have to do something about that!'"

"I think she put an ad in the paper and got about 60 people to attend a meeting at Holy Trinity Church (in January 1975). She wasted no time."

It was at that meeting that Elaine and Andy Black met the Laus and established lasting friendships – and joined in the efforts to establish an active arts community in the town.

Lau asked attendees at the meeting if they were interested in starting a community theater and, with no hemming or hawing, quickly determined that locals were committed to the cause. It wasn't long before the first year's schedule was determined, including Neil Simon's "Plaza Suite," the classic musical, "Anything Goes," and a children's production. They still needed a place to stage the show and a place to build sets, but in no time she had secured the Southbridge High School auditorium for the former and vacant buildings at American Optical for the latter.

For the musical, Lau volunteered to serve as the show's director, and Black soon found herself serving in the role of producer. "I didn't have a clue what it meant to be the producer, but I soon found out," she says, adding that the Laus proved to be "real good friends."

That first year was managed so efficiently (with Aileen as the group's first president) that it set the stage for Gateway's regular season's offerings of three productions, including a children's theater production by children.

"She thought that was very important," says Black, noting that such nationally recognized theatrical successes as Randl Ash and Kenny Hasija Jr. began their careers on Gateway stages.

The Laus were especially good at inspiring even non-theatrical volunteers to lend a hand in both



Friends Elaine Black, left, and Aileen Lau Dickinson have stayed in touch for 40 years.

"Anything Goes" and succeeding projects, says Black. "Sometimes it takes someone new to see what we don't have and to do something about it," she says of Aileen's enthusiasm for establishing an arts culture in town. "She had a knack for making everyone want to take part in a project, no matter what their role. She made the ticket takers feel just as important as the people on stage."

Carol Hayes, another of those involved with local community theater from the start, recognized Lau as the "founding person" behind Gateway, whose work ethic, energy, and experience all helped bring the dream to reality. "She was a talented director and a wonderful actor. I admired her greatly," said Hayes upon learning of Lau's passing. "She was the grand dame of Gateway."

"She certainly was the driving force behind everything," added Barbara Day, a longtime Gateway member and contributor who recalls the "Aileen Awards" – the local equivalent of Oscars or Tonys – that were given annually. "They were a big ta da, with searchlights and everything," Day said of the special recognition events, named of course for the energetic, effervescent Lau.

"She has left a very active legacy in the arts community," noted Day, adding that Lau has continued her financial support of the group she founded as well, "sending a donation every year" to help fund

Gateway's continuing efforts. "And we're still going strong."

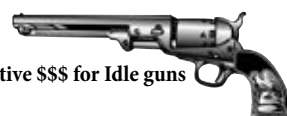
Dick Whitney of Southbridge remembers Lau "really well" from the very first year of Gateway productions (1975), when he was a cast member of the musical "Anything Goes." "I'll always think of her fondly," he said of the experience of working under her direction.

He also remembers her returning to town for a Gateway Alumni Reunion in 2002, when dozens of original and early members paid their respects to the dynamic founder and first president. "We all remember her leadership. She'll be missed – and will always be respected."

Christine Berard, who joined the theater group somewhat later, noted that Lau was "very instrumental in establishing both Gateway and the Arts Center" and that her memory and her influence "from those early years" will continue to be felt for a very long time.

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