

Concerts held in honor of Stella Heavner (1916-2014) and subsidized by the Stella Heavener Memorial Fund

Stella Heavner, of Heavner Canoe and Kayak Rental in Milford loved gospel music, the old hymns, and the old Gospel quartets. It is fitting that this concert series bear her name. Though she is surely with the Lord today, her love for music is felt in each and every concert.



The Heavner Family in 1950 - Chester, Alan,
Stella and Herb

Stella Heavner, along with husband Chester, founded Heavner Canoe and Kayak Rental in 1953. The nearby Kensington Metropark was just in the developmental stages at this point. The business adventure sprouted after the couple attempted, and failed, to open a Dairy Queen.

The couple began their business with 11 canoes (eight new and three used.) Today, the business has grown immensely with over 200 canoes and kayaks for rent, as well as for sale. During an interview, Stella recalled purchasing their first canoe in Belle Isle.

"My husband, sister and I answered an ad for a canoe in Belle Isle. It was for an 18-foot Old Town canoe. We didn't plan to buy a canoe; we just went to check on it. It was a reasonable price and so between the three of us we cleaned out our pocketbooks, including our rent that was due the next day, and got enough money to for this canoe," she said.

The Heavner's second canoe—riddled with bullet holes—was salvaged from someone's back yard when the owner was finished using it for target practice, and a business was born.

"We were looking for a retirement business ... We explored the entire Huron River before we decided on the property," she continued. "We loaned our beautiful 18-foot canoe to someone, which is what gave us the idea to start renting ... Alan and his brother were the only two we had working for us in the beginning."

Today, Heavner Canoe and Kayak Rental has become a local institution. This year, the business is celebrating its 68th year.

Stella was also a nurse. She moved from Ohio to Detroit, grew up on a farm and enjoyed the outdoors.

Her and husband Chester enjoyed outdoor activities together. For their honeymoon the couple rode their bicycles from California to Michigan. Their total bike rode back took 29-30 days with the last day's ride requiring 142 miles of pedaling.

After the honeymoon came the children, at which point Stella's two boys joined the family adventures. A favorite spot for the family was the Adirondack Mountains of New York.

Some local adventures for Stella included canoeing from Commerce to Lake Erie in pursuit of property to begin their canoe rental business and working as a Sunday School Teacher at Highland Church of the Nazarene.

Those who knew her remember Heavner as a successful and dedicated business woman, and much more, as well.

"Everyone has a Stella story," said Pastor Mike Hefner of Highland Church of the Nazarene, where Heavner attended. "She was a

through her interaction with multiple generations. Everyone looked at her as a woman of very strong faith."

Sharon Keenan, education and special events assistant coordinator at Heavner's Canoe said she met Stella Heavner about 20 years ago, but had gotten much closer to her in the last seven or eight years.

"She was such a kind heart, and was very religious – very spiritual," Keenan said. "She always enjoyed being outdoors, and she'd always come out, winter or summer."

Heavner, Keenan said, especially enjoyed socializing and attending special events, like the Milford Memories Blind Canoe Race sponsored by Heavner's.

"She didn't miss a beat at her age," Keenan added. "The fact that Heavner's became such an institution in the community, such a thriving business, is a testament to her passion."

Linda Shallman met Heavner some 15 years ago through Highland Church of the Nazarene, where Shallman attended Bible study while her children were in preschool at the church.

"I think I can speak for all the women in our group when I say Stella impacted our lives in a way she will never know," Shallman said. "She was the example of a true Christian, never judgmental with such a big heart and shared her wisdom with all of us young women who had babies at the time."

Heidi Bey, director of the Highland Adult Activity Center, was close with Heavner, attending church with the family for years, working for the business and, most recently, providing in-home care for Heavner.

"I spent a lot of time with Miss Stella and made a point to listen and learn," Bey said, noting Heavner was a consummate keeper of both local and family history. "We called it Waltons hour. We'd sit around and she would read us things from the 1800s about family members she remembered as a young girl who traveled by horse drawn carriage to Michigan because the Indians were getting hostile in Montana.

Heavner, Bey said, also told stories about getting her nursing degree out of high school and coming to Michigan "because she'd make 23 cents an hour more at the hospital in Detroit. And the story about when she and Chester married in 1939, drove to California and bicycled back to Michigan.

"Miss Stella was one of those people who lived life," Bey said. "Even as she got older, she was never crabby or grumpy, never grumbled about her aches and pains; she kept going to historical society meetings, spoke with kids about nature and went to concerts in the park."

"She was a devout Christian woman of the Lord, and such a blessing," Bey added.



Stella and Alan