Virginia Felson's Life Story
The World Should Be Left a Better Place
Nancy Felson, Sharon Felson
2005

The following tribute to Virginia Felson was written by her daughter Nancy and her daughter-in-law Sharon. It served as nomination for the 2005 Cincinnati Enquirer's Woman of the Year Award. The essay lays out Virginia's long time commitment to her community and to her network of family and friends. In relaying her life's story, the testimonial conveys her accomplishments, interests, and zest for life. Virginia died at age 101 3/4, on June 20, 2016, 11 years after this testimonial was written.

Virginia Felson has long been an idealist committed to helping people, firm in her belief that “you should leave the world a better place.” She has always been a role model to her five children, each of whom have demonstrated a similar social conscience.

Virginia has worked for the Public Welfare Department, the Ohio Employment Center, and the Salvation Army. Over the years she has read for the blind over the radio and actively volunteered for the American Red Cross and the Cincinnati Public Schools. In further service to the community, she has sat on the Board of Directors of Camp Joy and as vice-chair of the Jewish Center Speakers’ Forum was instrumental in inviting such speakers to Cincinnati as Martin Luther King, Jr., Margaret Mead, and Alistaire Cooke.

In her 90s, recognizing that her elderly neighbors needed a sense of community, she took it upon herself to organize social gatherings at her apartment building.

On a recent visit, Virginia recited anecdote after anecdote. She has good reason to have so many interesting stories to tell. Her father was an inventive optometrist with a passion for saving eyes. Her husband was a world-renowned radiologist and head of Radiology at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine and many local hospitals. And all her children are creative, dynamic individuals making their marks on the world. There seems to be an infinite amount of family material from which Virginia can draw.

Virginia was born in Newport, Kentucky on October 12, 1914, the youngest daughter of Jacob (Jake) and Ida Raphaelson, immigrants from Eastern Europe. She and her two older sisters lived with their parents in an apartment above her dad’s optometry/optician store.

Jake, one of eight children in a Lithuanian Jewish family, arrived in America at age sixteen with one penny in his pocket. Virginia notes her father was a rebel, a socialist, and a practicing Jew, as well as a “man of curiosity and ideas” who frequently expounded on his theories on a wide range of subjects. When his middle daughter was still not speaking at the age of five, he taught her to talk by using a pebble in her mouth. This daughter eventually became an attorney and the first woman lawyer in Cincinnati.

Having bad eyes himself, Jake developed a theory of wearing plus glasses to protect against becoming near-sighted and to improve long distance vision. He authored five books on saving vision, including the title, Stretch Your Eyes. “He was simply ahead of his time,” Virginia says. “Now they’re testing his theories in China.”

Jake dabbled with other remedies such as laughing to exercise the mouth (Virginia says she stills follows his theories by moving her mouth in various expressions while she rides
the elevator). Always wanting to try new things, Jake had the first shower on Monmouth Street in Newport. When in his 90s, he stood on his head to put a hernia back in place. He was also reputed to have the first pair of pedal pushers in the area, being averse to pant legs that hovered around his ankles.

Virginia’s mother, Ida Berman, a practical woman with an eighth grade education, had come to America from Europe at the age of two. Her conservative Jewish family didn’t take great stock in educating girls.

When Virginia was in 4th grade, the family moved from Newport across the river to the Avondale neighborhood of Cincinnati. She was advanced into fifth grade at the Avondale School but felt socially behind, keenly aware that her classmates were wealthier and embarrassed that her hand-sewn family clothes produced by Ida didn’t always hang properly.

In 1940 her entrepreneurial and ever-restless father bought 150 acres on a mountain near Asheville, North Carolina. Here he built a stone and log cabin. Jake loved the mountains because the temperate air cooled his hot feet, and his aches and pains disappeared. His five grandchildren still own the property, and Virginia and Nancy recently had the cabin renovated.

Virginia cherished her bond with her father and inherited his penchant for inventive ideas. She felt less close to her mother, whom she considered unstimulating and often negative, particularly after Ida’s 29-year old daughter, Nettie, burned to death in a house fire.

Young Virginia was close to Selma, her older sister by eight years. An educated, nurturing woman, Selma was part of “the Dixie-Bobbies,” a group whose members were the first to bob their hair. Virginia’s daughter Nancy also loved her Aunt Selma, who taught her “to keep my options open and gave me a sense of play” – not to mention introducing Nancy to poetry and cashews.

At Hughes High School, Virginia thrived. When she was fifteen and a senior, she met her future husband, sixteen-year old Ben Felson, at a dance. Although Ben was only a year older than Virginia, he was four years ahead of her in school, about to graduate from the University of Cincinnati and go on to medical school. It was Ben who advised Jake to send his extremely bright daughter to college.

Four years later Virginia graduated with a bachelor’s degree in sociology from the University of Cincinnati. In March of 1933 the 19-year old married her sweetheart and subsequently began coursework in the university’s graduate social work.

By 1942 the couple moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where Ben did short-term work in radiology and their first child, Steve, was born. The next year they moved to Indianapolis, with Ben working at the V.A. Hospital; here daughter Nancy was born. In Indianapolis they encountered negative stereotypes about Jews even among the educated doctors with whom Ben worked.

The couple was separated in 1944 when Ben went to war in Europe, where he was involved in the Battle of the Bulge. Reunited after two years, they returned to Cincinnati and bought a house in the neighborhood of North Avondale. Ben began teaching radiology and heading the Cincinnati General Hospital radiology department. Their family increased by three with the births of Marcus, Richard, and Eddie.
During the McCarthy Era, Ben and Virginia were both investigated concerning possible associations with the Communist Party during their college days. The family endured anti-Semitism in Cincinnati and in Ben's medical environment, with Ben initially passed over for a promotion to the head of the department of radiology. Two close friends, Charles Barrett and Johnson McGuire, supported him, and eventually Ben was selected. He served as head for many decades.

The family persisted in its strong Jewish identity, and Ben made frequent trips to Israel. An honorary professorship was established in his name, and part of an Israeli forest was named in his honor.

While Ben was increasingly becoming world-famous in radiology and was being invited to lecture all over the globe, Virginia created her own reputation with her work and volunteer efforts and with her feisty and inquisitive personality. Often accompanying Ben on his world trips, “she was the life of the party -- a social genius,” Nancy recalls about her mother. Ben, easy-going by nature, thrived on Virginia’s exuberance.

“My mother was a woman of her generation,” Nancy continues. “In those days, women hadn't sorted out what they would do professionally.” Yet Virginia found a rewarding niche being a social worker, both paid and as a volunteer. Among her ventures were volunteering at the American Red Cross (assisting victims of the 1937 flood and writing biographies of returning soldiers to help with their mental health treatment) and volunteering for the Salvation Army as a counselor to unwed mothers. Virginia also volunteered at a cancer clinic at University Hospital and at Walnut Hills High School, where her kids attended school, and tutored individual students in reading at another school. Among her friends in Cincinnati was the celebrated local activist, Reverend Maurice McCracken.

Always rebellious, in March of 1965 Virginia anticipated joining the Civil Rights Movement March on Selma, Alabama, but Ben didn’t want her to go because she would have to leave the kids behind. Rebelliousness is a key quality she values in her kids and grandkids.

Virginia traveled so much with Ben, including journeys to China, Egypt, and Africa, that they were nicknamed “citizens of the world.” For the several weeks that their parents were gone, the children would remain home under the care of their loving housekeeper, Fanny, or occasionally Selma or their grandparents.

The family eventually moved to their spacious welcoming house on Rose Hill Avenue in North Avondale. “Our family always had lots of company including foreign students,” Nancy recalls. Although Ben was a workaholic, he insisted on being home at 6 p.m. sharp for dinner with his family.

“I was a laissez faire parent,” Virginia says, “always letting the kids make their own decisions.” She is very proud of how they turned out. “They are lovely, and they all have a social conscience,” she extols. “I want to be around to see what happens in their lives.”

Tragically, in October of 1988, 75-year old Ben died of a heart attack. Virginia eventually sold the Rose Hill house and moved to an apartment near scenic Eden Park. Until she was eighty she continued to drive and played tennis avidly. Passionate about learning, she took many an adult education class.
It was in one of these classes that she met her companion of the next several years, Jule, whom she calls “a real gentleman.” Together they traveled on Elderhostel programs and enjoyed each other’s companionship until he suffered a stroke. His daughter brought Jule to Boston to be nearer to her. Virginia traveled east to visit him, but it was not long before he died.

In 2000 she moved to her present home, a comfortable condo on the nineteenth floor of a Hyde Park high rise building, offering pastoral views from her balcony. She quickly became beloved by the other residents as the person in charge of social activities, a role from which she only recently has resigned.

Relishing connections with others, Virginia has served on the board of the Women’s University Club and has belonged to a profusion of discussion circles, including a book club, gourmet club, contemporary writer’s club, and playwright club. A regular at bridge games at the Hyde Park Senior Center, she is known for her propensity for flamboyant head gear and has been dubbed “the Hat Lady.”

She relates well to younger people, often preferring their company to that of older people who, she says, tend to discuss their ailments too much.

Virginia is crazy about her five children, eight grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. “They’ve all found their passions,” she comments, “and they’re all workaholics like their father.”

Three of her children are professors, and two are lawyers. Marcus is a professor of criminology at Rutgers University and Richard a professor of criminology at Penn State. Daughter Nancy, a former civil rights movement activist, is now professor of classics at the University of Georgia. Steve is a Cincinnati consumer fraud attorney. Her youngest son, Eddie, is a lawyer, a jazz bassist, and the “jazz professor” who hosts a radio show on WCIN/1480 AM Sunday afternoons. He has also newly become part owner of Cincinnati’s Blue Wisp Jazz Club, a long-time institution for the local jazz scene. Virginia is determined to acquaint herself with this genre of music and recently spent a night at her son’s club absorbing the ambience. “Trying to learn about jazz – now that’s something to live for!” she quips.

Virginia was always associated with having a serendipitous quality. “One never knew where she was headed,” says Nancy. “She had a spontaneity, an open-endedness.” But according to Virginia, times have changed. “Now as I age I’ve become more orderly. I try to find a place for everything to help me to remember where things are.” She has a long-time habit of sleeping with chopsticks by her bedside to remind her not to eat too much, and dumbbells lay by the bed as a prompt to exercise.

Her combined temperament of jocularity and lack of inhibition recently led her to throw a lively pre-funeral party for herself so that she could share in the celebration with friends and family. “I’ve had a happy life,” Virginia declares. “Why not enjoy it too?”