

Campfire Stories:
CELEBRATING
Sheila Stearns

JUNE 2, 2023



UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

DR. SHEILA MACDONALD STEARNS

AUG. 30, 1946 - MAY 23, 2023

Sheila MacDonald Stearns, educator, died Tuesday, May 23, due to complications from lung cancer. She leaves behind hundreds of grieving hearts because she was so loved by so many.

Sheila was born August 30, 1946, in Ft. Snelling, Minnesota, where her father, Alexander MacDonald, was stationed as a dentist during World War II. Her mother, Marie Peterson, was the daughter of Swedish homesteaders, raised near Highwood, Montana. Alex and Marie moved their family to Glendive, Montana in 1947. The six MacDonald kids treasured their free-range childhood spent exploring the banks of the Yellowstone River and nearby Makoshika State Park.

Sheila was a graduate of Sacred Heart School and Dawson County High School, where she was Valedictorian, National Honor Society member, Science Fair and Spelling Bee champion, cheerleader, member of the Homecoming Court, and friend to so many in her class of 1964 and beyond.

Sheila arrived at the University of Montana in September 1964, where she pledged the Alpha Phi sorority and found many more lifelong friends. In Missoula, she met the love of her life, Hal Stearns, on a Newman Center retreat weekend. Each knew within days that they had found their soulmate, and what a great partnership it has been. They were engaged to be married at Homecoming in 1967, when Sheila was crowned UM Homecoming Queen.

Sheila embarked on an exciting and meaningful education career that began with teaching middle school English at the U.S. Air Force Base in Wiesbaden, Germany. Sheila and Hal made it a point to "see the world" during those three years in Europe.

They returned home to Missoula where Scott MacDonald Stearns was born, followed a few years later by Malin Jean-Marie Stearns. They raised their children in Missoula, Sheila's beloved home community, with the aid of Missoula's fine public schools.

Having earned advanced degrees from UM, Sheila served as UM's 18th President, after posts as Montana Commissioner of Higher Education, President of Wayne State College in Nebraska, Chancellor of UM Western in Dillon, Vice President and Alumni Director of UM, and teacher and librarian at Whittier Elementary School.

In 2012, she was honored as a UM Distinguished Alumni. In 2017, Sheila and Hal were honored with the Governor's Humanities Award. She received an Honorary Doctorate from Montana State University in 2018.

Sheila modeled a life of dedicated and tireless public service. Much of her career was devoted to serving, building, and improving Montana's well-respected higher education system. She earned the admiration and respect of everyone she encountered in education circles and in public service, on both sides of the aisle, whether she was at a PTA meeting, in the halls of the Legislature, in the Governor's Office, or leading a campus community.

Sheila is survived by Hal, their children Scott and Malin, their spouses Julee Stearns and C.J. Johnson, and grandchildren Elise, Renn, and Lily Stearns, and Lexi, Mia, and Silas Johnson. She is also survived by MacDonald siblings and spouses: Mariellen Neudeck, Alice and Ray Down, Sandy and Susan MacDonald, her twin Peter and Kathleen MacDonald, Margie MacDonald and John Smillie; and by Stearns siblings and spouses: Jim Stearns, Nancy and Jim O'Kief, Michelle Stearns and Pat Smith, Tom Stearns and Noriko Mizoguchi, Jeanie Schmidt, Tim Stearns and Linda Clark, and many beloved nieces and nephews.

In lieu of flowers, please consider working to make education more obtainable for someone else, just as Sheila did for her kids, grandkids, and countless others. Memorials may be sent in Sheila's honor to the foundations of any of the many colleges she led and loved, including tribal and community colleges.



Program

Welcome: Special Selection from the UM Carillon.....*Barb Ballas*

As you enter the Ballroom, take a moment to enjoy a selection of photos and some of Sheila's favorite songs.

Honoring a Remarkable Life*Seth Bodnar*

At the Edge of the Campfire.....*William Marcus*

Campfire Stories #1

Musical Interlude: "This Land is Your Land"

Campfire Stories #2

Musical Interlude: Montana State Song

Campfire Stories #3

Poem.....*Mary Moe*

Campfire Stories #4

Musical Interlude: "You Were Always On My Mind"

Remembering Sheila*Kitte Robins*

Musical Interlude: "How Can I Keep From Singing?"

Closing.....*William Marcus*

Sing-a-long: "America the Beautiful"

Special thanks to our performers Christopher Hahn, Josh Farmer, and Connor Racicot.

"American the Beautiful"

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!

America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

Campfire Stories #1

Steve Barrett
Tony Campeau
Waded Cruzado
Mike Easton
Royce Engstrom
Stefani Hicswa

Campfire Stories #2

Susan Briggs
Lucy France
Amy Heller
Kathy Nygard
Monica Paoli
Paula Short

Campfire Stories #3

Rosi Keller
Kent Haslam
Greg Munro
Sharon Scarborough
Joe Whittinghill
Cindy Williams

Campfire Stories #4

Pete MacDonald
Elsie Stearns
Hal Stearns
Renn Stearns
Scott Stearns
Siri Smillie

Poem for a Dawson County Red Devil

by Doug James

In the rolling plains of Glendive's embrace,
A soul bloomed bright, leaving a lasting trace.
Sheila MacDonald Stearns, a beacon of grace and might,
Her journey etched in Montana's light.

From humble beginnings, she charted her way.
With dreams that soared like the wild birds in May.
The University of Montana called her name,
She thirsted for knowledge, fanned the learning flame.

Doctorate in hand, she set forth with stride,
A champion for education, hearts open wide.
She climbed the ladder, reaching new heights,
Commissioner of Higher Ed, guiding our flights.

Retirement's gentle whisper couldn't hold her still,
Back she came, a leader with indomitable will.
As Interim President, she graced our alma mater,
Her wisdom and guidance, like a radiant specter.

Sheila, a mentor, a compass in the dark,
Her brilliance inspiring, igniting each spark.
With kindness and intellect, she touched every soul.
Her presence a balm, making broken hearts whole.

Beside her, Hal stood, a partner true and strong.
Their love a symphony, an everlasting song.
In laughter and tears, they weathered life's gales,
Their bond an anchor, a love that prevails.

Today, our hearts weep, the pain hard to bear,
As we mourn a loss, a void beyond repair.
No words can capture the depth of our sorrow.
For Sheila, a bright star, we'll see again tomorrow.

Diagnosed with stage 4, she faced the light,
Lung cancer's shadows couldn't dim her light.
A noble warrior, she battled with grace,
Living with purpose, a glow on her face.



**“No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that rock I’m clinging.
Since Love is Lord of heav’n and earth,
How can I keep from singing?”**



**To share your favorite Campfire Stories, please visit
www.umt.edu/president/celebrating-sheila-stearns.php**