

Helen Silha, Beloved and Constant Supporter of the Silha Center, Passes Away in October 2017

The Silha Center staff mourns the recent passing of donor Helen Silha. Silha Bulletin Editor Scott Memmel wrote the following article in her memory.

On Oct. 21, 2017, Helen Fitch Silha passed away at the age of 98. Together with her husband, the late Otto Silha, Mrs. Silha generously provided a grant to establish the Silha Center for the Study of Media Ethics and Law and the Silha Professorship in 1984. The Silha Center was founded to be the vanguard of the University of Minnesota School of Journalism and Mass Communication's interest in the ethical responsibilities and legal rights of the mass media in a democratic society.

Otto Silha had been president and publisher of *The Minneapolis Star* and *The Minneapolis Tribune*. He was later chairman of the Board of Directors of the company, renamed Cowles Media Company, from 1979 until his retirement from the Board in 1984. He predeceased his wife in 1999. Mrs. Silha continued to support the Silha Center after the passing of her husband through her attendance at the Center's annual Silha Lectures and Spring Forums.

Mrs. Silha was born May 21, 1919 in Manhattan, Kan., the youngest of three children. She attended Principia College in Elsah, Ill., for two years, then the University of Minnesota, where she received her Bachelor of Science degree in education in 1941.

After graduating, Mrs. Silha taught social studies and English at schools in Tracy, Minn., and worked in the Student Activities Bureau at the University of Minnesota. Beginning in 1963, she organized classes at her home in Edina for the Continuing Education for Women Program at the University of Minnesota. Mrs. Silha also served on the boards of Minnesota Early Learning Design, COMPAS, and the Edina Special Children's Group.

Mrs. Silha's spiritual life was very important to her. She was a lifelong Christian Scientist and was active in her church, Third Church of Christ, Scientist in Minneapolis.

Part of the work of the Silha Center is to provide research assistantships and fellowships to graduate students and law students. Since 1984, numerous students have benefitted from these assistantships, many of whom can now be found teaching and conducting research at leading universities or practicing at

law firms across the country. The financial support from the Silha family provides numerous opportunities for research, writing, networking, and learning more about critical topics in media law and ethics.

Elisia Cohen, director of the Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota, observed that Mr. and Mrs. Silha left a lasting legacy at the School. “I had the opportunity to meet Helen Silha at the fall lecture. She was a delight to speak with, and committed to the promotion of professional journalism and media ethics for the betterment of our democratic society,” Cohen wrote in an email. “The legacy that she and her late husband, Otto, have provided in endowing the Silha Center for the Study of Media Ethics and Law and its Director position will benefit the Minnesota community for years to come. Now, more than ever, we need leaders like the Silha family to support professional journalism and media ethics education. On behalf of the faculty and students in the Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication I extend my condolences to the Silha family. We are grateful for their legacy and continued support.”

Silha Center Director and Silha Professor of Media Ethics and Law Jane Kirtley also reflected on getting to know Mrs. Silha and her keen interest in media law and ethics. “I met Helen soon after I was named the Silha Professor of Media Ethics and Law in 1999. . . . I discovered that Helen was intensely concerned about contemporary issues affecting freedom of the press. Though not an attorney herself, she took a keen interest in the media law topics we explored at the Silha Center, and she loved talking with the prominent media attorneys who delivered Silha Lectures on topics such as libel, privacy, reporter’s privilege, regulation of electronic media, and national security. In fact, when the Silha Research Assistants and I sat down to talk about what stories we would cover in each issue of the *Silha Bulletin*, we used Helen as our bellwether.” Kirtley added, “Helen also cared -- a lot -- about ethics, just as Otto had. She sometimes fretted about what she saw as a decline in standards in the traditional mainstream media, and encouraged the Silha Center to address that.”

On a personal note, I always made a point of talking to Mrs. Silha and her family at Silha Center functions. Mrs. Silha was always willing to listen to the latest happenings with the Silha Research Assistants and was so complimentary of our work. I think I speak on behalf of all past and present Silha Research Assistants when I say how thankful we are for the funding and opportunities provided by the Silha Family. Mrs. Silha will be missed, but certainly never forgotten. Thank you, Helen Silha.

—Scott Memmel

Silha Bulletin Editor