

Distinguished Achievement HALL OF FAME

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Elizabeth “Betty” (Nolan) McGowan, 2021 Brainerd Public Schools Distinguished Achievement Hall of Fame Inductee

Elizabeth “Betty” (Nolan) McGowan, a 1938 Washington High School (WHS), now Brainerd High School (BHS) graduate, journalist and mother of nine, has been posthumously named a 2021 Brainerd Public Schools (BPS) Distinguished Achievement Hall of Fame inductee.

McGowan is the third member of her family to be inducted. Her sister, the late attorney and judge, Eleanor Nolan, a 1926 WHS graduate, was inducted in 2000. McGowan’s nephew, former Congressman Rick Nolan, a 1962 WHS graduate, followed in 2006.

In an era when many women were discouraged from pursuing higher education or a professional career, McGowan somehow managed to achieve it all, both a large family and a professional career. She was a constant and steady presence who tirelessly supported her husband and children, along with the family newspaper businesses. Later in life she became a dedicated advocate for Minnesota seniors.

“I’m just so proud of her for being recognized,” says Meg McGowan of her mother’s induction into the BPS Distinguished Achievement Hall of Fame. “She wasn’t encouraged to have a career, but she managed to keep her hand in and contribute where she wanted. I’m sorry she’s not here to receive it, but it is well deserved. It’s nice to see this type of career path recognized. I hope she’s an inspiration to younger people.”



McGowan was born in 1920, the youngest of seven children of James and Nora Nolan, Brainerd. James worked for the post office, while Nora worked in her own mother’s millinery, or hat store, before they were married. During the Great Depression, times were tough, but Nora found ways to support the family. She would sew, raise vegetables, and bake.



As young girls, Betty and her sister, Margaret, would walk around their Brainerd neighborhood peddling their mother’s baked goods. Education was important in the Nolan household and homework was completed together around the dining room table.

At WHS, McGowan served as editor of the school newspaper, then known as the *Weekly Brainonian*, and was awarded the prestigious Josten’s Award by her Brainonian colleagues. As the 1938



Brainonian yearbook reported, the Josten’s Award was for her “qualities of leadership and service.” McGowan also played trombone in the WHS band and was president of the band council. In a time of limited female athletic opportunities, McGowan was active in the Girls Athletic Association and was a member of what was known as the “Girls Reserve,” an organization that supplied its members as volunteers to other school organizations. She was a lead actor in class plays, a member of the National Honor Society, and an honor graduate.

For the first 25 years or so of the *Brainonian* yearbook, two regularly appearing features were the “Class Will” and the “Class Prophecy.” In the 1938 Class Will, McGowan was described as giving to another woman “her intense interest in journalism and (her) all-around good spirit.” The Class Prophecy purported to look ahead several decades to identify what select members of the class would be doing in the seemingly distant future. In the 1938 Class Prophecy, McGowan was predicted to be an “editor.”

After graduation, McGowan attended St. Cloud State Teacher’s College, now St. Cloud State University, to study journal-

ism. While in college, she served as class president, homecoming queen, and—of course—editor of the student newspaper. However, she was advised by college counselors that, as a woman, journalism would be a difficult career for her to enter. McGowan reoriented her aspirations and found employment as a teacher in Appleton, Minnesota, near the South Dakota border.

There she met Martin McGowan, who had just earned his journalism degree from the distinguished University of Missouri School of Journalism and who aspired to join United Press International in Chicago. However, his father was attempting to run the local newspaper with essentially no staff because of World War II, and Marty, as he was called, decided to stay in Appleton.

If Betty McGowan wasn’t going to be a journalist, then it seemed logical that she would marry one, which she and Marty did in 1943. Together they learned the newspaper trade at the *Appleton Press*, which eventually became her husband’s business. Caring for their children was principally Betty’s responsibility, but she was also deeply involved in the newspaper. After her husband was elected to the Minnesota State House of Representatives, requiring him to spend time in St. Paul during legislative sessions in the eight years he served, Betty essentially ran the *Press* in his extended absences, serving as publisher and managing the newspaper.

The McGowans sold the *Press* in 1965 and moved to St. Paul, where Marty worked in public television. After six years in St. Paul, the family moved to Blue Earth, where Betty again contributed to reporting and developing advertising, this time for the *Blue Earth Post* weekly newspaper. The McGowans also later owned and published newspapers in Winnebago and Elmore. Then in their 60s, they would spend a few months in Florida during the winter, finding temporary news reporting jobs while there.



The McGowans moved to the St. Cloud area while Marty served as public relations director at the College of Saint Benedict and as an account executive for a printing company. When he retired, Betty went back to college, earning her master’s degrees in gerontology, at 72, in 1992 from St. Cloud State University, 50 years after her first degree. Betty’s thesis was written, 30 years ago, on the need

for a single payer health insurance system. At the same time, Betty volunteered for the Minnesota Senior Federation, serving on its state board, and helped develop the Senior Expo trade show for central Minnesota.



“She just didn’t want to stay home,” explains her daughter, Meg. “She always said she didn’t knit or crochet, so she went back to grad school. It was true to her personality and how she saw herself. She was very personable, very outgoing, and she enjoyed meeting people. Everyone who I’ve run into who knew her says she was an enjoyable person to be with.”

The McGowans retired to Crow Wing County’s Pelican Lake, but neither of them could resist indulging in their passion for local journalism. In their 70s, they both worked as correspondents for the *Lake Country Echo*, covering local city and county meetings. Marty suffered from macular degeneration and could no longer drive, so Betty would drive him to Crow Wing County Board meetings and stay until he needed a ride home, in addition to covering her own meetings for the Pequot Lakes newspaper.

Finally, the McGowans moved to a senior living complex in St. Paul when they both were 80. Marty passed away in 2009, when the couple had been married 66 years. Betty then passed away on the last day of 2014.

Meg McGowan says of her mother that she was “certainly a role model for never giving up, for putting up with all the unfairness, but not being discouraged from pursuing a career she wanted. She kept at it. She made a difference. And she was a good mom. It isn’t easy to raise two daughters and seven sons, and we all have a great bond. We were glad to be part of our family.”



2020
Richard
“Dick” Ashmund
1946 Graduate



2020
Jennifer Carlson
1987 Graduate



2020
Yen Chu
1989 Graduate



2019
Quintas A. Blackburn
1917 Graduate



2019
Steve Clough
1976 Graduate



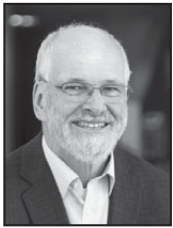
2019
Kevin Thesing
1974 Graduate



2018
Scott Lykins
2004 Graduate



2018
Mary Tornstrom
Extraordinary Service to
Brainerd Public Schools



2018
Steve Lepinski
1966 Graduate



2017
Kelly Burnham
1984 Graduate



2017
Kristen (Doyscher)
Williams
1998 Graduate



2016
Anthony Griffin
1997 Graduate



2016
Keith R. Keller
1978 Graduate



2016
Robert Gross
BHS Above and
Beyond Award



2015
Colonel Ronald
Albers
1965 Graduate



2015
Dr. L.J. Nickisch
1974 Graduate



2015
Brian Nystrom
1977 Graduate



2015
Branelle Cibuzar
Rodriguez
2000 Graduate



2014
Tom Haglin
1981 Graduate



2014
Joshua (JP) Larue
1992 Graduate



2014
Nancy Pedersen
1970 Graduate



2014
Dennis Wolfgang
Borgwarth
1979 Graduate



2013
Sheila Wasnie
Haverkamp
1981 Graduate



2013
Connie
Marshall-Grittner
1964 Graduate