

In Memory of

Hyde Park Historical Society's Faithful Member

Marian Despres: 1909 - 2007

Activist was Chicago insider

Wife of former alderman helped found architecture foundation and served on landmarks commission

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Published January 6, 2007
Chicago Tribune

Photo Source: University of Chicago



Magazine

Marian Despres was an architectural preservationist, civic activist, author and art collector who held a doctorate in psychology and an insider's knowledge of Chicago politics courtesy of her husband, former Ald. Leon Despres.

The daughter of a prominent architect, Mrs. Despres was a founding member of the Chicago Architecture Foundation and started what has become a popular program to train volunteers to lead architectural tours of the city.

Mrs. Despres, 97, died on Thursday, Jan. 4, at Jackson Park Hospital, several weeks after choking on a piece of food at her Hyde Park home, her husband said. She had suffered a stroke about four years ago but had been in relatively good health until recently, he said.

In 1966, Mrs. Despres was among a group of Chicago architects and citizens who raised \$35,000 to buy and thus save the Glessner House at 1800 S. Prairie Ave. The group originally was known as the Chicago School of Architecture Foundation.

"It was the civic community that took it to the next step and she was the key," said Lynn Osmond, the foundation's executive director. "She was brought up with architecture and she loved not only the buildings but also what architecture means to people's lives. She was passionate about the whole subject."

Mrs. Despres' involvement brought immediate respect to the fledgling preservationist group, said architect Benjamin Weese.

"It was a bunch of ragamuffin kids and she had stature and dignity and clout," Weese said. "She and [former Chicago Sun-Times architecture writer] Ruth Moore Garbe could go in to Mayor [Richard J.] Daley and say, 'This is what we want.'"

In 1970, Mrs. Despres handed out diplomas to the foundation's first group of volunteer docents. The foundation now has 450 volunteers who lead about 9,000 tours annually, Osmond said.

From 1985 until 2000, Mrs. Despres was on the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, which works to preserve the city's architectural heritage.

"I think it was in her blood," Weese said. "She fell right into the preservation system."

Mrs. Despres was born in Chicago and grew up in Winnetka, the daughter of architect Alfred S. Alschuler. Her two brothers, Alfred and John, followed their father into architecture.

After graduating from North Shore Country Day School she went to Vassar College. At a party in Glencoe over Christmas break her sophomore year, she met Leon Despres, a young man from Hyde Park who soon would become a Chicago lawyer.

She returned to Vassar. He sent her a book, "Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times and Teaching," by Joseph Klausner. A correspondence ensued, and she decided to transfer to the University of Chicago.

"We really did fall in love, you could set the date, 1928," Leon Despres said.

The couple married in 1931, a year after she earned a philosophy degree from the U of C. In 1936, she received a doctorate in psychology from the school.

In 1937, a fellow lawyer asked Leon Despres to deliver a suitcase of clothing to Leon Trotsky, the exiled Bolshevik living in Mexico. The Despreses traveled south and met not only Trotsky but his ally, artist Diego Rivera. Mrs. Despres sat for a portrait with Rivera while her husband escorted Rivera's wife, the artist Frida Kahlo, to a movie.

After receiving her PhD, Mrs. Despres worked as a group therapist at the Jewish Children's Bureau for four years and then was an assistant psychology professor at Roosevelt University from 1946 to 1951.

At Roosevelt, she urged a student who had impressed her in class to run for student council. Harold Washington won the race for council president, and later, as mayor of Chicago, liked to say that Mrs. Despres launched his political career.

Active in Hyde Park community affairs and a founder of the Hyde Park Co-op Society, Mrs. Despres in 1943 circulated petitions and organized supporters in a successful campaign to allow African-American students into the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools.

Leon Despres won his City Council seat in 1955 and for the next 20 years and as an independent was a thorn in the side of Daley and the Democratic machine. Mrs. Despres gave up her own career in teaching and psychology to back her husband, he said.

Regal in bearing yet highly approachable, Mrs. Despres moved easily between the hurly-burly of Chicago ward politics and the politesse of the city's cultural institutions and art galleries, said veteran political consultant Don Rose. In Chicago and on annual trips through Western Europe, her discerning eye built a modern art collection her husband said has appreciated nicely in value.

"In her way she was as much of a doer as [Leon] was," Rose said. "She was equally involved in the politics of the city, but very much of her own mind."

Survivors also include a son, Robert; a daughter, Linda Baskin; and a grandson.

Services will be held at 2:30 p.m. Jan. 14, in KAM Isaiah Israel, 1100 E. Hyde Park Blvd., a synagogue designed by Mrs. Despres' father.

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