

Ann Carter Stith, 2000 Ethical Society of St. Louis Humanist of the Year

Ann Carter Stith Sunday, April 9, 2000: "I consider Ann to be an outstanding community volunteer and a tireless advocate for individuals who have no one to speak for them," says State Representative Emmy McClelland. And former U.S. Senator Thomas F. Eagleton describes Ann as a doer. "She does not simply join some organization so that she can list it on a biographical sketch," he says. "She joins because she wants to do something for that organization and for the greater good of the St. Louis community."

As for Ann, she believes that jail inmates deserve compassion, which they often don't receive. "There was a vacuum in the adult criminal justice system," she says, "and I was drawn into that vacuum. And I never met a really evil person in all my visits to prisons--there was always a humanity there."



Ann was born in Nashville, Tenn., moved to St. Louis at age three, and was educated at John Burroughs School, Vassar College, and Washington University. She was first exposed to the criminal justice system when she worked as a police reporter at the Star Times, St. Louis' third newspaper. But she gave up her career in 1943 to marry and raise five children. Her oldest daughter, who also became a reporter, died at age 33. Her three other daughters and her son became lawyers, inspired by their parents' interest. Ann is married to Richard Taylor Stith Jr., who works in life insurance and financial planning.

Ann began volunteer work in the 1962, after she served on two consecutive St. Louis County grand juries and was required to visit the county jail. "I talked with a 17-year-old boy who was in jail for possessing liquor," she recalls, "and I was shocked to find him living in the same area as rapists and murderers."

She campaigned for a new jail, and a bond issue was passed in 1966. The jail, which was built at Gumbo, housed minor offenders awaiting trial or serving short sentences. In 1960, Ann also was appointed chair of the county's Board of Jail Visitors, so she made jail visits once a month and advised the County Council. Later, she was appointed to the Missouri Department of Corrections Advisory Committee, a post she occupied for 15 years. Visiting prisons all over the state, she made recommendations to the director of corrections when prisons were unable to resolve issues. Typical problems included lack of medical attention, lack of visitors, and mistreatment of prisoners.

During this time, Ann and her colleagues founded MOCAI (the Missouri Commission for Alternatives to Imprisonment), which folded in 1990. Meeting once a month in Jefferson City, the group made recommendations to the Department of Corrections and the Missouri Legislature. Their efforts resulted in more funding for probation and parole services and in the Community Sentencing Act, which helps people who initially are ineligible for probation because of lifestyle or drug addiction. Under the act,

judges can bring prisoners back into court after three months of imprisonment and offer them community service. The offenders also receive preparation for and help in finding employment. After holding a job for six months, they can be released from the program. "Prisoners who receive community sentencing are much less likely to commit subsequent crimes than those who come out of prison without help," says Ann.

The task Ann enjoyed most was nominating judges for the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals, which has jurisdiction over five Midwestern states. President Jimmy Carter chose two of the five nominees--Judge Theodore McMillian of St. Louis and Judge Richard Arnold of Little Rock. "They are the greatest judges on the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals," Ann says. "I enjoyed that job because judges are terribly important." She now has two in the family-- one of her daughters is a Missouri appeals court judge, and a son-in-law is a federal appeals court judge.

Ann's work with prisoners, many of whom were poorly educated, abused, and neglected as children, prompted her interest in education. As president of the Conference on Education, she helped pass the federal Disabilities Act and spearheaded a study of local educational practices. "We found three things that were common to good schools: teaching basic skills, good principals, and parental involvement," she says.

As vice chair of the Desegregation Monitoring Committee, Ann visited schools throughout St. Louis to ensure compliance. She also served on the task force that founded Parents as Teachers, which helps new parents with parenting skills. For many years, she has been on the board of Springboard to Learning, which offers enrichment programs to St. Louis area schools.

Her major focus today is the Family Support Network, where she serves as vice president and sits on several committees. The network places counselors in schools and in the homes of families at risk for child abuse. The counselors work intensively with high-risk children and their families, teaching parenting skills and nonviolent methods of discipline. Only three percent of children in the program suffer subsequent abuse. "I believe that if we can prevent abuse, we can prevent crime," Ann says.

She still attends two or three committee meetings every week, motivated by the needs of underprivileged children. "Ann knows that children are our future and continues to work hard on their behalf at a time in her life when she could retire and take it easy," says Emmy McClelland.