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A Farewell to One of Roosevelt's Finest

EDISON – What made Ilona “Loni” Merel, one of the greatest patient advocates ever to travel the halls of Roosevelt Care Center in Edison, was that she wasn’t championing a particular cause – she was the keeper of her home.

After nearly three decades as a Roosevelt resident, the former Rutgers University professor and one of the Center’s most memorable figures died at the age of 86 on Jan. 8.

Staff, fellow residents and visitors are still coming to grips with the loss, what many described as a devastating blow to the Roosevelt community.

The long-standing President of the Resident Council is largely remembered for her public criticism of the residents’ monthly, state-issued \$35 Medicaid stipend, the sum of which Merel deemed inadequate.

In a letter to the editor published in the Home News Tribune on Jan. 20, 2003, Merel wrote:

“States have the authority to increase the federally mandated minimum (Personal Needs Accounts). In New York, Rhode Island and New Hampshire, it is \$50; in Alaska it is \$75. New Jersey – with the highest cost of living in the United States – has one of the lowest PNAs in the country. Even states like Mississippi, Kentucky and North Dakota provide higher PNAs than we do.”

Merel often penned letters like these to regional newspaper, local officials and even state representatives, giving anyone who might read, an education on the state of long-term care issues – both locally and in the broader sense.

“It was no secret when Loni felt she or her fellow residents had been slighted,” said Roosevelt Administrator Dr. Frank Damiani. “She was also quick to let her aids and nurses know when she saw room for improvement; but she was never short on praise when they met those standards. It’s her honesty, both the critiques and compliments that will be sorely missed.”

Director of Building Services, Rocky Edwards, recalled his first meeting with Merel in 2001.

“She had a great number of physical challenges, speech and mechanical, but her mind was sharp as a tack,” Edwards said. “She was extremely bright and knowledgeable on current events, social issues and politics. She was the type of person whose criticisms were always accompanied by a suggestion”

Today, Merel’s influence even resonates with the institution’s staffing patterns, as her suggestions for more feasible and effective scheduling were not only taken under consideration but implemented, much to the benefit of both employees and residents, Damiani said.

In addition to her work with Resident Council, Merel was also noted as an active member of a local National Multiple Sclerosis Society chapter.

“People don’t always agree on how things should be done but I always admired someone that wants to get something done,” Edwards said. “She genuinely cared about the staff and residents and would go to bat for anyone.”

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