

Edie Shapira's Introductory Remarks of Elsie Hillman

Remarks of Edie Shapira Nonprofit Summit: Presentation of the Frieda Shapira Award May 11, 2011

Good afternoon. It is a great honor—and delight—to join with you today in paying tribute to someone we all hold very dear; an amazing woman, and a unique Pittsburgh treasure, Elsie Hillman.

To begin, please join me in watching this brief video.

Those of you who know Elsie know that she loves stories, so I hope she won't mind if I open with one about her. Some years ago, an organization on whose board I served managed to run afoul of the then-Governor. Although we were certain we had acted appropriately (mostly) it was important to our work that we mend fences, so Elsie arranged for us to meet with the Governor to talk through our differences.

In what was one of the fastest and scariest car rides of my life, Elsie drove a group of us to the meeting (expressing concern, at one point, as she glanced in the rear view mirror, that the police might be about to pull us over for speeding!) She then sat serenely, as the Governor—in his booming, stentorian voice—scolded us for upsetting him. When he was done, Elsie proclaimed, “Oh my, Governor, I'm so sorry, we would never want to upset you, please know how very sorry we are.”

At which point she leaned over to me and, in a stage whisper worthy of Shakespeare said, “Dear, could you remind me what we're apologizing for?” I could hardly contain myself!

It was so very Elsie. It was a meeting only she could have made happen. She wanted to make sure that a Governor she respected (and to whom she was close), and an organization she supported (and on whose Board she served) found a way to get along with each other, for their mutual benefit, and for the benefit of the city she loves. And at the same time, she punctured the tension of the moment with a reminder not to take ourselves too seriously.

My mother loved those qualities about Elsie—her civility, her efforts to help people and organizations get along with each other, and her wonderful sense of humor. As those of you who knew Frieda may remember, she, too,

possessed some of those qualities. And even though Elsie was considerably younger, my mother was inspired by her.

My brothers David and Danny, and my nephew Jeremy, are here with me today to celebrate this moment, and what all of us can tell you is, that our mother would have been deeply honored and delighted to see this award going to Elsie, as are we.

Frieda was passionate about social justice, about creating a more fair and equitable world for all people. That was the fire that burned within her—and she simply loved and celebrated that someone of Elsie’s stature profoundly shared those values and spoke out so vigorously on behalf of them. In Elsie she saw a woman who was fiery and fearless, and my mother found it empowering just to be around her.

Both of these remarkable women were inducted into the Distinguished Daughters of Pennsylvania. My mother used to say that one of the very best parts of going to the meetings in Harrisburg was that it gave her a chance to spend time with Elsie. Even though they came from somewhat different worlds, they had a friendship built on shared values, and that friendship mattered, deeply, to Frieda.

One of the videos you just saw mentioned a commencement speech my mother gave at my daughter Sarah’s high school graduation. The wish she expressed in that speech was that, in solving community problems together, the students would meet people they otherwise never would have met, and in that process would discover lifelong friends in places they never would have thought to look.

I like to think that’s what happened with Frieda and Elsie.

Fifteen years ago, Elsie wrote a poem that she delivered at a political gathering, and it ended like this:

I’d like to leave with one last thought
Be gentle, friends, and kind
Respect each other’s differences,
Leave bigotry behind!

The only thing that we each have
Are the gifts that God has shared
He did not pick and choose, you know
Our worth was not compared.

So let’s leave this hall in harmony
Our work should well be done.
And tell the face in the mirror each day,

Being nice is much more fun.

When you think about it, the essential values of community are embedded in those three stanzas. Elsie is a hero to our community—and to the nonprofit sector that serves it—because she lives a life true to her values of fairness, inclusion, compassion, and, yes, fun.

That's why, on behalf of The Forbes Funds, and in cooperation with the Jewish Healthcare Foundation, and in the company of Frieda's other children, I am so pleased and honored to present the Frieda Shapira Medal to Elsie Hillman.