

Memorial Minute for Alma Ruth Steward, member of Buffalo Monthly Meeting
March 12, 1935 - November 5 2013

“ I feel that 40 years is long enough. I want to officially become part of this community, to join with you... in building a world in which human dignity is recognized and nurtured... I urgently need a home.”

Ruth Steward penned these words in 1986 in her original request for membership in Buffalo Monthly Meeting, and they help to describe the person she was. Steady, careful, thoughtful, with a fine mind, Ruth worked hard at whatever she did. And she did much. Long before she became a Friend officially, she was doing the work of peace, education and speaking truth to power.

Born on March 12, 1935 on her grandparents' farm along the Pudding River in Silverton, Oregon. A later move near San Diego exposed the young Ruth to the Japanese internment camps. Ruth's parents befriended the interned Japanese, and actively assisted in getting medical care for a young Japanese baby, and in one case, when a family had been denied their sugar ration, offered their own ration, causing Ruth to go without a birthday cake. From that act of generosity, a lifelong friendship grew and it extended to the next generation

Ruth excelled at school, graduating valedictorian of her class in 1952. She received a scholarship to Laverne College and eventually her Masters degree in chemistry and teaching from Yale in 1959. She participated in several AFSC youth programs and in 1961 was a member of the first group of Peace Corps Volunteers deployed to Nigeria. There she taught math and English at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka. She spent the summer of 1964 working as a Civil Rights worker in Mississippi, despite her family's severe anxiety about her safety, which increased when death threats were made to her parents in the middle of the night.

She returned to Los Angeles, teaching at a high school in Watts. During a year of medical leave from teaching, she worked with the entertainment industry segment of the anti-Vietnam War movement seeking ways to communicate with the American people through this medium.

Feeling that her skills were being called in another direction, she moved into the area of environmental toxicology, reasoning that the environmental movement that was predominately middle class needed to understand the life needs and rising expectations of the poor. She obtained a doctorate in environmental toxicology at the University of California in Davis in 1982 and spent the remaining years of her career working on environmental issues including dioxin, a potent toxin found in Agent Orange. Following a post-doctoral fellowship at the Medical College of Virginia, she came to Buffalo State College as a research scientist in the Great Lakes Lab.

The final ten years of her research career were spent as a research scientist for the New York State Department of Public Health in Albany, NY.

She traveled to Beijing to consult on pollution problems there, and also to Costa Rica and Nicaragua to participate in a water project. She retired in 2011 at the age of 76.

After 40 years of devoted service to humanitarian causes, her membership in the Religious Society of Friends was an acknowledgement and a confirmation of her beliefs more than the marking of a new journey. Her lifelong dedication to the improvement of the human condition remained a steadfast light, by which many were enabled to see more clearly.

Ruth is survived by her brother, Palmer Steward of Davenport, Iowa, her sister Martha Porter of Sebastapol, California, five nieces and nephews and ten great nieces and nephews.

