

Phyllis N. Koffler

1921-2019



On March 31, 2019, Phyllis Koffler died peacefully at the age of 97. To the very end, she was engaged with the many friends that were a part of her life in Tucson and the many places she and her husband, Dr. Henry Koffler, had lived throughout the United States.

Phyllis was born on June 5, 1921 and grew up in Maumee, Ohio, a small city on the Maumee River near Toledo. Her mother was Josephine Frazier and her father was Charles Pierson. At an early age, Phyllis developed a love of music and dogs that would remain with her for the rest of her life. An avid raconteur, she once related a story of being three years old and winding up the old family Victrola to play her favorite classical music piece so that she would be able to take a nap. And she also recounted a story about her very first dog which she acquired as a toddler - an *imaginary* dog as it turned out - that started her down the path of being a major dog lover throughout her life.

As a young girl in Ohio, Phyllis suffered from severe respiratory challenges, but in 1937, at 16 years old, she was well enough to join several of her classmates for a life-changing trip to France where her horizons were forever broadened. Upon her return, though, with her health still an issue and sophisticated antibiotics not yet available, her parents were encouraged to relocate her to Arizona and its warm, dry climate. With this move as a solution, she transferred to St. Joseph's Academy in Tucson, and began to truly thrive as well as develop her deep love of the southwest.

After graduating from St. Joseph's in 1939, Phyllis enrolled at the University of Arizona, majoring in French and library science. And it was during the very next year, that she met Henry Koffler with whom she became engaged shortly after he took one look at her and made up his mind they would be married right after he completed his doctorate at the University of Wisconsin. But Phyllis wasn't sitting around during this period. She had her own professional identity working in the library.

Phyllis always talked fondly of her early years in Tucson. In addition to liking St. Joseph's and enjoying her improving health, she loved horses and used her physical education classes to ride. In addition, she exercised the horses regularly at the Reserve Officers Training Corp, which was housed at what is now the location of Banner Health/UA Medical school.

In 1947, Phyllis and Henry moved to Lafayette, Indiana to spend the next 28 years actively involved in the vibrant Purdue University activities. There wasn't a week that went by they didn't host groups of Henry's students. A great many of their lifelong friends stemmed from these years. With an active performing arts program at Purdue, Phyllis regularly was asked to host the performers. She proudly talked about entertaining the likes of James Earl Jones, Marian Anderson, Victor Borge, and the Bolshoi Ballet. Again, her childhood love of music and dance was fulfilled in meeting these artists. And a deep passion for the performing arts was clearly one that Henry and Phyllis shared together all of their lives.

In 1975, the next stop for the Kofflers was Minnesota and its University where they built a modern home thirty miles from Minneapolis. Their house was deep within the woods with nature and its wildlife completely surrounding them. Phyllis had to purchase two warm and snuggly sheepskin coats to make it through the Minnesota winters while out walking the dogs. But she loved every minute of this. And it wasn't until nearly 40 years later that she was able to part with those coats, so deep was her affection for Minnesota and the Midwest. The Kofflers also had a favorite summer place in Michigan between Traverse City and the Sleeping Bear Sand Dunes where they continued to return every year. And it was here at the cottage that they shared many special moments with friends when Phyllis hosted all occasions with her own special grace.

Phyllis did not want to leave their beautiful Midwest home for western Massachusetts in 1979 when Henry became Chancellor of U. Mass Amherst. And after a few years she was more than ready to return to Tucson. Phyllis recently told the story of writing a letter to someone at the UA encouraging them to consider Dr. Koffler as the first alumnus to become president of the university. We will never know who she might have talked to, but in 1982 she got her wish when Henry was appointed President of the University of Arizona and they returned to Tucson where they lived contently with several German shepherds and took every advantage of all the science and culture that the University and the town has to offer. After Henry's retirement, he and Phyllis were pioneers and among the early founders of Academy Village and the Arizona Senior Academy where they lived and participated for the rest of their lives.

Phyllis had a very keen sense of irony. Her wonderful voice and laughter are signs of her zest for life and linger in the air for all who knew her well. At the same time, she was stoic about the difficulties of aging.

Phyllis is loved by so many people she knew in every community that she lived. She was a powerful force both unto her own and as a partner to Henry during their 71 years of marriage. It is fitting that she left this world on the last day of March, a month when we honor women who have made a big difference, as we now honor Phyllis Koffler, a uniquely strong, intelligent, compassionate lady wrapped in a wry wit. Phyllis Koffler will be sorely missed. In June there will be a memorial gathering at the Arizona Senior Academy. Details will follow later. Donations in Phyllis Koffler's name can be made to the Henry & Phyllis Koffler Prize at the UA Foundation, to the Arizona Senior Academy, or to a charity of your choice.