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Grace Pierce-Beck dies at 82

Environmentalist had hand in Coastal Zone Act

By *MOLLY MURRAY*

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Grace Pierce-Beck dreamed of being a professional ballerina or a choreographer.

Instead, she became one of Delaware's most influential environmentalists -- a petite, soft-spoken woman who often measured her successes in small, incremental steps in her battles against polluters and in support of Delaware's fragile shoreline and creatures like the horseshoe crab.

Pierce-Beck died Sunday at age 82.

Her legacy to Delaware is impressive: the landmark Coastal Zone Act, international recognition and regional protection for the horseshoe crab, along with the \$2.5 million Texaco settlement that took more than a decade to resolve at the former Texaco oil refinery at Delaware City.

"She's my hero," said Mark Martell, president of Delaware Audubon, who credits her with keeping him interested in the society.

Others get frustrated at the pace of change, he said.

Pierce-Beck was quick to let young environmentalists know "it doesn't work that fast," Martell said.

"She was probably one of the most forceful, gentle souls that I ever met," said Christophe A.G. Tulou, a former Delaware environmental secretary who now directs the Heinz Center for Sustainable Oceans, Coasts and Waterways in Washington. "She knew her stuff -- the policy, the process. She knew Delaware."

Pierce-Beck grew up in a solidly Republican household.

The family had a cottage on the Chesapeake Bay and Pierce-Beck spent time fishing and learning about native plants from her father, said her daughter, Linda Dolan.

Young Grace wanted to become a dancer, taking lessons at the Philadelphia studio of Catherine and Dorothe Littlefield.

She wanted to dance, but she was too small, Dolan said. So she set her sights on choreography.

World War II got in the way of that dream. Rather than travel to France to study, Pierce-Beck attended business school in Wilmington and went to work for the DuPont Co. before she was married to Willard Lemar Pierce.

After the war, the couple moved to Dover, where they owned and operated Pierce's Pharmacy.

Pierce-Beck became involved in the Kent General Hospital Junior Board and in local Republican

Party politics.

Local legend has it that when former Republican Gov. Pete duPont asked Pierce-Beck how he could win the governor's race in Kent County, she joked, "Change your name."

It was through politics that Pierce-Beck met former Gov. Russell W. Peterson. She worked with Peterson to win passage of Delaware's Coastal Zone Act and then went on to Washington to work as a lobbyist for the Wilderness Society.

Dolan said her mother learned through Peterson "that you could reconcile conservative Republicanism with environmentalism."

When her husband got sick, she left her job in Washington and returned to Delaware.

Over time, she took on key environmental issues and was one of the first to recognize the importance of the horseshoe crab.

As a town councilwoman in Slaughter Beach in the early 1980s, Pierce-Beck urged local officials to remove only the dead crabs from the beach and let the live ones return to Delaware Bay.

Rep. V. George Carey, R-Milford, said initially he didn't understand why Pierce-Beck was so passionate about the crabs. But later he came to understand her concern and worked with her to protect the animals. On Wednesday, he described her as "the queen of horseshoe crabs."

She married a second time to Richard G. Beck.

She received local and national recognition for her efforts and this year was named to the Delaware Commission for Women Hall of Fame.

State environmental Secretary John A. Hughes said Pierce-Beck had a knack for finding a solution rather than fighting a point.

"We owe her our lasting gratitude," Hughes said. "Her fingerprints are all over many of the important things of modern-day environmentalism."