



Stories in Stone: Cornelia Atherton Serpell 1917-2011

By Alexandra Luken, Cave Hill Heritage Foundation



Cornelia Atherton Serpell.
Photo from family.

On the precipice of disaster, mental healthcare in Kentucky found a fierce advocate in Cornelia Atherton Serpell. She dedicated her life's work to championing sweeping changes in how mental health illness was perceived and treated and eliminating barriers to healthcare in rural Kentucky.

Cornelia Atherton Serpell grew up in a family where community activism was a family trait and expected. Both her grandfather and father served in the state legislature. Her grandfather, John McDougal Atherton, founder of Atherton Distillery, was a champion of public education. Her father, Peter Lee Atherton, was instrumental in getting parole and probation laws written into Kentucky statutes. Her mother, Cornelia Anderson Atherton, received Britain's King's Medal for the Cause of Freedom for her work with the Bundles for Britain program during WWII, modeling for her daughter the virtue

of leveraging social and political status with diplomacy and the skills of arbitration, negotiation, and the navigation of channels to build consensus for public service causes.

While a student at Sarah Lawrence College in 1937, Cornelia Atherton Serpell first read a shocking series of nationally-acclaimed articles in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, her hometown newspaper, about the treatment of the mentally ill, which described it as a "living death." In 1939, she attended a lecture sponsored by the Junior League of Louisville about the best and worst state mental hospitals across the country. When she asked what she could do, it was suggested that she start a recreation program for patients at Lakeland (later Central State Hospital), for which there was no money in the budget. Patients confined to straitjackets for days on end, or chained to the wall, naked and unable to stand up, hosed down by the staff to keep them clean were the norm in facilities like these at that time. No medications were given to patients; psychiatry was in its infancy. The horrifying conditions were jolting to Serpell, who began volunteering at the hospital, often as frequently as five days a week.

She began working as unpaid independent lobbyist for mental health causes during the General Assembly, making every legislator aware that it cost more money to board her dog at the vet per day than the state paid per day to feed, house and care for a mentally ill person. Though her persistent efforts, the budget for people with mental illness was increased. The state set up a separate Department of Mental Health in 1952. Serpell also helped create the Kentucky Association of Mental Health in 1948, and served as its president.

Serpell worked hard to get mental health into the mainstream of general health, and to remove the criminalization and stigmatization of mental health issues. Her focus included the inclusion of basic psychiatric training for general practitioners and a process for the treatment of mental disorders.

She served on many state and local councils and boards dealing with mental health, health planning and aging, including the Bingham Child Guidance Clinic, the Jefferson County Alcohol & Drug Abuse Center, Bridgehaven, Visiting Nurse Association, the Kentucky Commission on Aging, the State Board of Medical Licensure, Council for Health Services, and the Kentucky Legislation Ethics Commission, and received numerous awards recognizing her life-long work in the field of health services.

Some of the many awards and recognitions received for her service included: the Distinguished Alumna Award from Louisville Collegiate School, the Health Kentucky – Service to Humanity Award, Kilgore Good Samaritan Award, and the President’s Award for the Kentucky Association of Health Care Facilities.

Cornelia Atherton Serpell is interred in Section 13 Lot 110 in Cave Hill Cemetery.

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