



Benjamin Dimmitt

LuEsther T. Mertz
1906–1991

Founder of the
LuEsther T. Mertz Funds in
The New York Community Trust
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New York, NY 10022

Audiences enjoying performances at such celebrated New York venues as the Public Theater, Lincoln Center, and the Joyce Theater, would never know that behind many of these scenes once stood a diminutive woman from Rossmoyne, Ohio. And that's the way LuEsther T. Mertz wanted it.

The person who was to become a great champion of the arts in the capital of the arts was born in a former Odd Fellows Hall, the youngest of six children, to James Elmer Turner, and his wife, Lulu Esther Smith Turner. Her father, a peripatetic Methodist minister, had moved to Rossmoyne and bought the Hall in order to start a seminary. Lulu died when LuEsther was four. When LuEsther was seven, James married Blanche Curry of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and subsequently relocated the family there. Her father died soon after the move, and LuEsther was raised by her stepmother.

James had been passionate about education; he wrote his own textbooks, and passed along to LuEsther a great love of literature, poetry, and books in general. Appropriately, when she attended Syra-

cuse University, she trained as a librarian. Her love of poetry was a quality cited by all of her friends and relatives, especially her startling ability to turn to you in the middle of a conversation and recite in its entirety a poem appropriate to the moment.

In 1927, LuEsther married a brilliant businessman-to-be, Harold Mertz whom she had known since they were in high school together in Williamsport. They rented a car and toured Europe on their honeymoon—the first of many international adventures for two lifelong travelers. In 1929, a daughter, Joyce, was born, followed by Peter in 1935.

Shortly after Joyce arrived, Harold and LuEsther moved to Paterson, New Jersey. One day, Joyce became ill with a high fever. LuEsther, new to the area, desperately searched the phone book for a pediatrician. She chose one at random and he came to the house to treat Joyce. His name was William Carlos Williams and he became one of her favorite poets.

The family later moved to Port Washington on Long Island. There Harold, a successful magazine publishing executive, began a small sideline business in 1953. Realizing that magazines had a tremendous need for a cheaper way of gaining renewals, he hit upon a simple but untested idea—through direct mail, one sales agent could sell subscriptions for many publishers more effectively and cheaply than the publishers could do it themselves. Harold, LuEsther, and Joyce sent out their first mailing of

10,000 letters, achieving a one percent response rate, 100 letters. “Our whole list fit into a shoe box,” declared LuEsther in a 1986 interview.

The idea, however, was a winner. The business quickly outgrew the Mertz basement and eventually became a marketing legend—Publishers Clearing House. The company presently serves hundreds of publishers, employs more than 800 people, and is best known for its annual televised sweepstakes event, which has awarded over \$100 million in prizes since its inception.

With newfound resources, the family’s generous nature soon expressed itself and in 1959, they founded The Mertz Foundation. With Joyce’s marriage to Robert Wallace Gilmore in 1964, and his subsequent installation as the foundation’s president, the foundation pursued goals—such as human and civil rights, peace, humane treatment of animals, and environmental protection—guided by Joyce and Robert’s interest and involvement in the Quaker movement. Larry E. Condon, current chairman of what is now known as the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, describes the spirit of the foundation “as an expression of the family’s desire to contribute to the world in which they lived.”

LuEsther’s first personal project ingeniously combined her generosity with her love of books. Casting about for ideas, LuEsther was struck by the fact that the visually impaired had no access to the world of high-quality periodicals. She

subsequently conceived a spoken-word anthology that would bring the world of ideas contained in magazines to visually handicapped individuals unable to read regular print. Started in 1961, *Choice Magazine Listening* presented selected articles, stories, and poetry from magazines read aloud by trained speaking voices, and then transcribed onto vinyl records. (Today the magazine is issued on tape.) Describing her new venture, Mrs. Mertz said:

I do not think of this project as philanthropy. To me and those associated with me, it represents a privilege, an opportu-

LuEsther Mertz at her home in Sands Point, New York, in the early 70s.



nity for communication and even self-expression. It is a chance to share some of the good reading we enjoy. And if we do it well, as we hope, it will be a stimulating and rewarding experience.

During the 70s and 80s, LuEsther became renowned for her support of the arts, international human rights, services for the blind, and other worthy causes. A list of her board memberships and philanthropic concerns is an honor roll of New York's cultural landmarks. She was a major supporter of Lincoln Center, the New York Botanical Garden, and the Central Park Conservancy. She was a great lover of dance, contributing to the New York City Ballet, and serving on the board of the Original Ballets Foundation, which supports the Feld Ballet and the New Ballet School. She was presented with the Mayor's Award for Arts and Culture in 1983, and in 1986 received the New York State Governor's Arts Award.

Perhaps her greatest coup as a patron, however, was her involvement with Joseph Papp and his New York Shakespeare Festival. As Helen Epstein describes in her biography, *Joe Papp: An American Life* (Little Brown 1994), LuEsther first became acquainted with the Public Theater in 1971 when she attended its "Saved From the Wrecker's Ball" at the invitation of her daughter Joyce. Subsequently, LuEsther adopted the New York Shakespeare Festival as



Larry Condon and LuEsther in Alaska, 1982.

her family, and quickly became its chief financial contributor.

In 1970, Papp was desperately seeking a way of bringing *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's play, to Broadway. He and his co-producer, Bernard Gersten, took LuEsther out to lunch to explain their problem. If they could move "Two Gents" to Broadway, it would put the Festival "squarely in the mainstream of American Theater and generate the kind of income *Hair* had generated." The Festival had licensed *Hair* to a commercial producer, and while it enjoyed a cut of the profits, the percentage was small compared to the overall revenues the hit musical had generated. If they could find a backer to give the Festival the money to move the show, the Festival would own all of the profits.

As Helen Epstein relates, several days later, LuEsther wrote to Papp and Gersten:

I have thought a lot about “Two Gents” and what it will mean to the Shakespeare Festival. And I am more sure than ever that we should not give any part of it away to anyone else. Therefore I am prepared to say that I can and will guarantee a contribution up to the 250M we talked about at lunch. . . . We just simply cannot afford to miss this chance to get on easy street.

“Two Gents” was a stunning success: It opened to rave reviews and ran for 18 profitable months. The New York Shakespeare Festival had become the first not-for-profit company to move a show to Broadway and retain all of its rights. It paved the way for subsequent Festival successes such as David Rabe’s *Sticks and Bones*, Jason Miller’s *That Championship Season*, and the legendary collaboration with Michael Bennett on *A Chorus Line*, whose move to Broadway was underwritten by LuEsther. Papp and the Festival gained national and international stature. LuEsther became chairman of the Festival in 1973 and served in that capacity until 1987.

Triumph and self-fulfillment came with more than a fair share of sorrow and tragedy. Harold and LuEsther’s son Peter died in 1954 during a fraternity initiation at Swarthmore College. The early 70s saw

the dissolution of LuEsther’s marriage to Harold, and in 1974, her beloved daughter, Joyce, died of cancer. The Joyce Theater on Eighth Avenue at 17th Street in Manhattan, which opened in 1982, is



Martha Swope

Gail Merrifield Papp, LuEsther, and Joseph Papp
celebrating *A Chorus Line*.

named in her memory. In 1988, Mrs. Mertz took on the chairmanship of the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation after the death of her son-in-law, Robert Gilmore. Late in life, the woman who founded a magazine for the visually impaired lost her own vision.

LuEsther was sustained by her belief in the innate goodness of people, her love of poetry, literature, and dance, a personality marked by equanimity, and a true enjoyment of giving. As her friend Georgia Delano remarked, “LuEsther would always say, ‘Don’t thank me because this is my pleasure.’” She would refer to the Joyce Theater and the Feld Ballet as “her jewels,” and downplayed her philanthropy by saying, “I just know a good idea

when I see one.” She also did not want any public recognition for her generosity. Joseph Papp described her as “high-spirited,” but “never wanting to be in the spotlight.” For all her giving, the only thing recognized by her full name is the LuEsther T. Mertz Retinal Research Center at the Manhattan Eye, Ear, and Throat Hospital. At the Public Theater, the performance space dedicated to her is named simply LuEsther Hall.

LuEsther inspired great love from her friends and family. Her friend, the famous biologist, naturalist, and environmentalist, Paul Ehrlich, immortalized her by naming a species of butterfly after her—*euphydryas editha luestherae*—perfectly appropriate for an “Angel of the Arts.”



Having had both her parents die at a young age, and having lost both of her own children, LuEsther felt a need for family togetherness. Her niece, Lois Reedy,

remembers LuEsther’s attempts to keep the scattered family together, planning and hosting large family reunions on both coasts. Her friends were also her family. Georgia Delano remarked that for someone who knew and circulated with the rich, famous, and powerful, LuEsther also maintained close ties with her circle of friends from college.

In her home community of Port Washington, LuEsther served as a trustee of the library and was a founding member of the League of Women Voters. She took an active role in the management of Publishers Clearing House, serving as a member of the organization’s Executive Committee from its formation until her death.

Perhaps the way to remember LuEsther Mertz is through her love of poetry. In a dedication to LuEsther at the Port Washington Library, Georgia Delano read William Carlos Williams’ *Poem*:

The rose fades
and is renewed again
by its seed, naturally
but where
save in the poem
shall it go
to suffer no diminution
of its splendor.

For LuEsther Mertz, a life of giving was her poetry. She died on February 5, 1991. In 1995, the LuEsther T. Mertz Charitable Trust established several funds in her name at The New York Community Trust.

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which provides centralized management
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