First Mates

T HE ROLE OF University of Minnesota president’s spouse began as a largely social one. But, moving through time, University “first ladies”—yes, so far they have all been women—championed causes, drove fundraising efforts, and served as important ambassadors.

I count myself lucky to have gotten to know partners of five of the previous 15 presidents. All five lived at Eastcliff, the official residence, where Eric and I also live. All are inspirational role models for me, remarkable women whom I greatly admire.

Tracy Moos is such a delightful, intelligent woman that I increased my involvement in the University of Minnesota Women’s Club partly to see more of her. She carried out the duties of spouse while raising five children. I can’t imagine raising five children (we have two sons), much less while in this role.

Among Diane Skomars Magrath’s many undertakings was a national survey of the role of university president’s spouse. Diane shared her files and mentored me as I joined with researchers to update and expand her survey, which can be found here: conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/183467. She also put together a notebook of Eastcliff information and history; I plan to follow up with a book.

Bonita Sindelir is a joy to know. While working as a lawyer and raising a young child, she endured the challenge of living at Eastcliff during a renovation—she and President Keller washed dishes in a bathtub. I am awed by how she handles life with grace.

Judy Yudof is a great example of a modern presidential partner. She ran an important international organization—the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism—while in the role. She oversaw an Eastcliff remodeling project, and those embellishments continue to enhance the residence.

Susan Hagstrum gave me much wonderful advice and generously introduced me to some of my closest friends. She chaired the spouses/partners executive council of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities. I later became chair of that council.

While I never met Patricia Hasselmo, she inspires me, too. She did wonderful work increasing fundraising through Friends of Eastcliff. I have appreciated, and sought to continue, her efforts.

It was while searching for information about Patricia’s work that I noticed the University had no documentation of presidential partners. These spouses have served the University well, so I am delighted that Ann Pflaum, the U’s historian, undertook this research.
Sarah Heywood was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1838. Her uncle was president of Hobart College, located in Geneva, New York, where she met her husband, William Watts Folwell. He graduated from the college in 1857.

Heywood and Folwell were married in 1863 while he took a 10-day leave from the engineering corps of the Union Army during the Civil War. They would have three children. At the time Folwell became the first president of the University of Minnesota, in 1869, it had nine faculty members and 14 students.

In 1883, as the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and its school were being established, it was discovered that the school was short of students. Sarah Folwell recruited the spouses of three community leaders, all noted to have “painting experience,” to help fill the class. She died in 1921.

Elizabeth Northrop was an active member of the First Congregational Church. As parents, they met hardship, outliving all of their children. She died in 1922.

Louise Palmer was born in 1864 in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, the daughter of Ellen Mary Webster and Henry Wilbur Palmer, who served as Pennsylvania’s attorney general and a U.S. congressman. A graduate of Wellesley College, Louise Palmer married George Edgar Vincent in 1890 and they had three children.

Among Louise Vincent’s interests were dance and physical fitness. James Gray, in his history of the University of Minnesota, noted that Louise Vincent created a ballroom on the third floor of the presidential residence, the first provided by the University:

“[H]ere undergraduates were turned free of official restraint to dance to the music of the piano player. At other times of the day, the dance floor became a basketball court onto which, stately, sometimes reluctant, faculty wives were driven by Mrs. Vincent’s resolute devotion to exercise.”

She was engaged in other University matters as well. In 1912, she presented four lectures on Guatemala through the newly established University Extension program. Two years later, she presented a play she wrote, A Cowboy in a Kurhaus, at the Shubert Theatre in Minneapolis as a fund-raiser for female students. She died in 1953.

Nina Moses was born in 1875 in Faribault, Minnesota. She and Marion Burton were classmates at Carleton College and married shortly after their graduation in 1900. They had three children.

Nina Burton was concerned about the well-being of female students. When her husband became president in 1917, she spoke to the University Women’s Self Government Association and a historian noted:

“She laughingly remarked that being the president’s wife was merely an accident of fate for which she deserved no credit or blame. She said she surely belonged to Minnesota because she was a Minnesota girl, and had lived in nearly every small town as a child, for her father was a home missionary. She urged all the girls to come to her any time, either for advice or merely as a friendly call.”

In 1920, Marion Burton left to become president of the University of Michigan, where Nina Burton’s work continued. She helped establish a women’s faculty club in Ann Arbor. She died in 1966.
MARY COFFMAN: 1920-1938
Mary Emma Farrell was born in Paoli, Indiana, in 1877. Her father was a circuit court judge. In 1899, Farrell married Lotus D. Coffman, Paoli’s high school principal. As Coffman’s career advanced, the couple moved from Indiana to Illinois to New York. They had two children.

When Lotus Coffman became dean of the University’s School of Education in 1915, Mary Coffman began her long association with the Faculty Women’s Club and became known for her dedication to student welfare.

In 1920, when Lotus Coffman became the University’s fifth president, Mary Coffman said, “With a daughter already in college and a son about to enter there this fall, how can I help but be interested, heart and soul, in all that pertains to the students?”

In 1945, the Women’s Club created the Mary Farrell Coffman Scholarship. She died in 1957.

JENNIE COFFEY: 1941-1945
Jennie Lardner was born in 1880 in Newton County, Indiana. She was a cousin of journalist and short story writer Ring Lardner. She married Walter Coffey, of Hartsville, Indiana, in 1907, and they had two sons.

The family was recruited to the University of Minnesota in 1921, when Walter Coffey became dean of the Department of Agriculture and director of the Experiment Station. Twenty years later, he became the University’s seventh president.

In 1943, during World War II, Jennie Coffey hosted the annual meeting of the Faculty Women’s Club at the official residence of the University president—then on Fifth Street Southeast—where they discussed a bandage-making effort for the Red Cross. She died in 1963.

FREDA MORRILL: 1945-1960
Freda Rhodes and James Morrill both grew up in Marion, Ohio. They married in 1915, two years after Morrill graduated from Ohio State University. They had three children.

The family moved from Ohio to Wyoming, where James Morrill served as president of the University of Wyoming, and finally to Minnesota where, in 1945, he became the University’s eighth president.

Freda Morrill is said to have particularly enjoyed working with a University architect and designer in 1946 to remodel the interior of the official residence on Fifth Street Southeast. She died in 1977.

GRACE FORD: 1938-1941
Grace Ellis came from a farm family in Kenosha, Wisconsin. She and Guy Stanton Ford were graduates of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. They married in 1907 and had two children.

When Guy Ford joined the University faculty in 1913, Grace Ford became secretary to the board of the Faculty Women’s Club and, upon the outbreak of World War I, she represented the club in the Women’s Peace Party. That signaled her deep interest in global issues.

She was the prime mover of the Women’s Club’s International Affairs Section, focusing on topics such as the Chinese-Indian border dispute, the roles of United Nations agencies, and the Caribbean. Grace Ford also served as northwest section director of the American Association of University Women. She died in 1974.

MARIAN WILSON: 1960-1967
Marian Wilson and O. Meredith Wilson met at Brigham Young University in 1937 when she was a student and he a history professor and debate team coach. They married in 1938 and had six children.

O. Meredith Wilson became the University’s president in 1960. Soon after their arrival in Minnesota, Marian Wilson received a call from John Cowles, Jr., son of the publisher of the Minneapolis Star Tribune. Cowles described a plan to persuade Irish stage director Tyrone Guthrie...
to establish a theater in Minnesota, hoping Marian Wilson would host a lunch for Sir Tyrone and Lady Guthrie. She immediately accepted and helped facilitate this significant addition to the region.

The Wilsons were the first presidential couple to live in Eastcliff, which was donated to the University by the Edward Brooks family. Marian Wilson died in 2011.

TRACY MOOS: 1967-1974
Margaret “Tracy” Gager was born in 1923, grew up in Washington, D.C., and attended Goucher College in Towson, Maryland. She met Malcolm Moos, a Johns Hopkins University professor, while on a blind double date with someone else. They were married in 1945 and had five children.

The University was the scene of many student demonstrations during Malcolm Moos’s presidency. Tracy Moos recalled the atmosphere in 1967:

“Students for a Democratic Society threatened to blow us up. Every day they would call and say, ‘Thirteen days, twelve days, and ten days,’’ like a countdown. So the police stayed [at Eastcliff] night and day, which was wonderful for me because I had babysitters built in.”

Tracy Moos established the Community Concern Section of the Faculty Women’s Club, describing it as a “way of exploring the whole state and the whole city and where the university connected itself.” Those connections extended globally as she accompanied her husband on trips to Morocco, related to forestry, and Tunisia, related to agriculture. She currently lives in St. Paul.

SANDRA MAGRATH: 1974-1977
Sandra Hughes and C. Peter Magrath graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 1955 and married the same year. They had one child. Around this time, while Peter Magrath served as an artillery officer at Fort Sill in Oklahoma, Sandra Magrath worked as a decoder of documents for the National Security Agency. After that, when Peter served on the faculty of Brown University, she was a proofreader for the American Mathematics Society and a copy editor at Brown University Press.

When Peter Magrath became University president in 1974, Sandra Magrath analyzed the role of the president’s spouse thusly:

“A great deal of this job is public relations work. I enjoy people, but I’m not going to be a slave to their unspoken expectations... I feel a wife should have a choice on how her life goes. Some women would prefer to be left out of their husband’s public work and pursue their home and children. I think neither should be censured by the public for her lifestyle.”

In 1977, Sandra and Peter Magrath separated after 22 years of marriage. She died in 2013.

BONITA SINDELIR: 1985-1988
Bonita Sindelir was born in 1946 in Warroad, Minnesota, and graduated valedictorian of nearby Baudette High School in 1964. That fall, she attended the University and studied English, drama, and speech communication. She worked part time at the University Hospitals and the Boynton Health Service to help cover tuition and living expenses.

After graduating in 1968, she taught English and directed drama in a suburban

DIANE SKOMARS MAGRATH: 1978-1984
A native of Duluth, Diane Skomars earned a bachelor’s degree in communications from the University of Minnesota Duluth in 1967 and a master’s degree from the University of Wisconsin–Superior in 1971. She was the first president’s spouse to graduate from the University and the second president’s spouse (after Nina Burton) to be born in Minnesota.

In 1978, Skomars and University president C. Peter Magrath were the first and only presidential couple to be married at Eastcliff. At the time, Skomars was director of the Student Activities Center on the Twin Cities campus. Together, they raised a daughter.

In recognition of the substantial workload of the spouse of a president, Magrath transferred $25,000 of his salary to her. Diane Skomars Magrath and University professor Roger Harrold conducted a survey of the spouses of presidents. The survey led to a book, coedited by Skomars Magrath and Joan E. Clodius, called The President’s Spouse: Volunteer or Volunteered, with essays from spouses, male and female. Skomars Magrath lives in Duluth, having retired from UMD as director of development.
junior high, then studied in Mexico. In 1970, she returned to the University and became assistant to Graduate School Dean May Brodbeck. That’s where she met Associate Dean Kenneth Keller. Sindelir went on to earn her law degree from the University in 1978 and joined the U’s Office of General Counsel.

In 1981, Sindelir and Keller were married. They had one son. In 1985, Keller became the University’s 12th president. To manage the roles of lawyer, spouse, and mother, Sindelir reduced her work to half time and used office vacation days to attend University events. Sindelir and Keller currently split their time between Minnesota and Italy.

PATRICIA HASSELMO: 1988-1997
Patricia Tillberg was born in 1930 in Moline, Illinois. Her mother played the organ in Lutheran churches and her father was a clergyman.

She earned a bachelor’s degree in philosophy at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, where she met her future husband, Nils Hasselmo, a former Swedish exchange student who was teaching a language course. After graduation, she went on to earn a master’s degree in higher education from Syracuse University. For a time, she served as associate dean of students at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota.

Tillberg and Hasselmo married in 1958 and settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as Nils earned a Ph.D. at Harvard. They had three children. During Nils Hasselmo’s many years at the University of Minnesota—serving as faculty member, dean, vice president, and, ultimately, president—Patricia Hasselmo was active in, among other organizations, the Ebenezer Society, the Golden Valley School Board, and the Metropolitan Council. She died in 2000.

JUDY YUDOF: 1997-2002
Judith “Judy” Gomel was born in 1945 in Philadelphia and graduated from Temple University with a mathematics degree. After graduation, she married Mark Yudof and took a job as a computer programmer while her husband attended the University of Pennsylvania law school.

From 1971 through 1997, Mark Yudof was a faculty member and senior administrator at the University of Texas. Their two children were born during those Texas years.

Mark Yudof became the 14th president of the University of Minnesota in 1997. Judy Yudof served on the boards of the Weisman Art Museum, the Tweed Museum in Duluth, the Goldstein Gallery on the St. Paul campus, Theatre Live, and the Chairman’s Council of Twin Cities Public Television.

In 2002, she became the first woman to be elected international president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. In 2006, she was named to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council. The Yudofs live in Jupiter, Florida.

SUSAN HAGSTRUM: 2002-2011
Susan Hagstrum was born in 1948 to Hugh Vincent Hagstrum and Barbara Shirley Hansen. Her father and his three brothers were University of Minnesota graduates, and so devoted was the family to the U that her father’s middle name, Vincent, was a tribute to former U president George Edgar Vincent.

After graduating from Henry Sibley High School in Mendota Heights, Hagstrum majored in speech pathology at Northwestern University. In pursuit of her Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota, she met Robert Bruininks, a faculty member in the College of Education. They married in 1985. Two years later, she earned her Ph.D. with an emphasis on language acquisition by special needs children. From 1987 to 2002, she held positions in schools in Mounds View, Buffalo, and Chaska, Minnesota.

In 2002, Bruininks became the University’s 15th president and Hagstrum focused her community involvement on four areas: children, the arts and humanities, education, and health. They currently live in Minneapolis.
KAREN KALER: 2011–Present
Karen Fults was born in 1956 in Nashville, Tennessee. She earned a B.F.A. at the University of Tennessee in 1977 and continued there for graduate school.

In the summer of 1979, she was working in a UT residence hall when Eric Kaler, a graduate student doing summer research, checked in. They married that December and made their first home near the University of Minnesota campus, where he completed a Ph.D. in chemical engineering.

She worked in the Twin Cities as a graphic designer and continued in that field as his career took them to Seattle; Newark, Delaware; and Stony Brook, New York. They raised two sons.

In 2011, Eric Kaler became the University’s 16th president. Karen Kaler has followed in the footsteps of her predecessors by being active in the University of Minnesota Women’s Club, volunteering in the community, and serving as an ambassador for the University. Recently, she published a children’s book about Eastcliff called Rusty Goes Swimming. She volunteers at the U of M Masonic Children’s Hospital and is an avid supporter of the Aurora Center for Advocacy and Education.

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