A lifelong commitment to peace and justice

Mary Starkweather-White Legacy Fund:

Mary Starkweather-White was a long-time supporter and Board member of Pacem in Terris and life-long activist for peace with justice. She was truly remarkable in all that she did— for Pacem in Terris, for returning citizens through the Moving Forward project, the Pardons Project, New Beginnings Next Step and through programs such as the Baylor Dance Program and the Baylor Peace Art Program that she initiated at Baylor Women’s Correctional Facility. We are honoring Mary and the projects she started and developed through the establishment of the Mary Starkweather-White Legacy Fund. The fund will be used for helping Pacem in Terris continue her restorative justice and other peace with justice work. Donations can be made to the fund here (at the Pacem in Terris website: www.depaceminterris.org). Please designate your donation for the MSW Legacy Fund. For those who do not like to make on-line donations, you can make a donation by mail to Pacem in Terris, 401 N. West St., Wilmington, DE 19801.

The following eulogy was written by Mary’s longtime friend and colleague at Pacem in Terris, Sally Milbury-Steen.

Missing Mary

Mary Starkweather-White (October 18, 1951 - July 9, 2019)

Mary Starkweather-White, who was indefatigable in her volunteer leadership, service, and generosity to Pacem in Terris for over thirty years, passed away unexpectedly in the early morning of July 9, 2019, at the age of 67. At the time of her death she was serving as the Secretary of the Pacem in Terris Board, a role that she had filled during a number of terms since first joining the Board in the fall of 1997. Mary’s ministry of minutes also extended to Delaware Citizens Opposed to the Death Penalty from 1992 to the present. Mary was also coordinating the Moving Forward program, a peer-support group for returning citizens, and the Baylor Peace Art program at the Baylor Women’s Correctional Facility.
Mary Starkweather and Earl White remember their first official date as walking with the Soviet-American Peace Walk which came to Delaware on May 22, 1988 through the sponsorship of Pacem in Terris. After they married, Mary and Earl continued their involvement with Pacem through The Delaware Committee for a Free South Africa (later renamed the DE Committee for Racial Justice and Harmony) which started the SOWETO Festival in 1990. Mary and Earl coordinating the poetry readings at the opening reception, which featured spoken word, visual art, and music continuing to do so through the 23rd and final SOWETO Festival in the summer of 2012.

Mary served on the Alliance for the Restoration of Ex-Offenders which was a joint project of Pacem in Terris and the Delaware Center for Justice that began in 1996. It was created partly in response to Gov. Ruth Ann Minner’s belief that legislation to restore the vote was unnecessary, because felons who wanted to vote just needed to get a pardon after they completed their sentences. The Alliance through the leadership of Janet Leban, Phil Bannowsky, Mary Starkweather-White, Sally Milbury-Steen, and others created two branches in 1998: The Ex-Felon Voting Rights Task Force and the Pardons Project. Mary as a professional paralegal found the Pardons Project a natural fit for her analytical mind, verbal talents, people skills, and legal understanding. The legislation to return the vote to former felons successfully passed in the Delaware General Assembly in 2000 and was signed into law years after it had first been introduced.

Phil and Mary continued working with the Pardons Project; he had written a handbook, Civic Redemption, to help individuals learn what they had to do in order to obtain a pardon, and Mary was advising pardon-seekers about which courts they needed to go to in order to obtain their records, helping them with their chronologies, affidavits, helping them fill out the pardon application form, and mailing it off through certified mail. At every step of the way, through her kindness and compassion, she gave them the courage and confidence they needed to continue and grow through the process. The first pardon-seeker that Mary and Phil helped through the Pardons Project went before the Board of Pardons in late May of 1998 and was successful. Mary discovered that it took about a year from the first meeting with a pardon-seeker at the Pacem in Terris office to get them ready to go before the Board of Pardons.

After Phil went to Lebanon to teach in 2002, Mary became the Coordinator of the Pardons Project and her reputation for helping the Pardon Project’s clients succeed began spreading in the community. In 2003 she helped 12 pardon-seekers go before the Board of Pardons. With the exception of two people who had come to her at the last minute, everyone whom she had helped from the beginning succeeded in getting a pardon.
The demand for pardons and for Mary’s services grew exponentially after the passage of the Homeland Security Act in 2002. It stipulated that anyone who had committed a felony within the past seven years or anyone who had been incarcerated during the past five years was prohibited from working at a port or an airport unless he or she received a pardon; otherwise, if they were currently working at a port or airport, they would be ineligible to work there after January 1, 2004. Working at the port of Wilmington had long been one of the few living-wage jobs open to returning citizens after they had completed their sentences. Consequently, many longshoremen and others started coming to the Pardons Project and asking Mary to give presentations about pardons to their union members and to hold pardon workshops for them.

By September 2011, the Expungement Task Force and the DE Department of Economic Development began negotiating with the Pardons Project to update the Civic Redemption handbook and to train a corps of people to offer pardon and expungement services at the Job Centers in libraries in every county. In February of 2012, Mary wrote that she and some of her volunteers, including John Krill from the Pacem in Terris Board, began “training new volunteers for the state-run pilot program as the state moves into the business of helping people get pardons.” APEX [Advancement through Pardons and Expungements] was initiated in 2012 through the Department of Labor and eventually it took over the work of the Pardons Project. It marked the first time that one of Pacem’s programs became both a prototype and an on-going program of the state of Delaware. It was Mary Starkweather-White along with her volunteers and many successful pardon seekers who made this possible.

However, Mary was too modest, too humble, and too busy helping others to draw attention to this huge achievement; she was always shining the spotlight on others. In her May 11 - June 20, 2010 staff report, she wrote this touching tribute to her husband:

“One volunteer who has been with us since the beginning is my husband, Earl White, a long-time Pacem member and past Board member, who for more than a dozen years met with pardon-seekers in the library, accompanied them to Staples and the Post Office, interviewed clients monthly at the union workshops at the Port, has helped with social outreach talks, has assisted with meeting notice mailings, and generally has made himself indispensable to the Project.”

After the Pardons Project merged into APEX, Mary continued to work with returning citizens through the Moving Forward project of Pacem in Terris. Moving Forward, which she led until her death with John Kornegay, is a peer support group for individuals who were formerly incarcerated and helps them find strength, courage, and healing by meeting together weekly.
It is very difficult for those of us who depended upon Mary’s minutes, as well as her volunteerism, generosity, goodwill, humor, friendship, and wisdom to fathom the depth of her loss. She was truly remarkable in all that she did for returning citizens through Moving Forward, the Pardons Project, the Pacem Baylor Art Program and through programs such as the Avodah Dance Ensemble residencies and the art project that she initiated and funded through her excellent grant-writing skills at the Baylor Women’s Correctional Institution from 2003 through the present. Mary was truly the Saint of Second Chances. Along with Bryan Stevenson, one of her heroes, she believed that “each one of us is more that the worst thing that we have ever done.” She turned this conviction into life-changing opportunity, acceptance, and encouragement to each person whose life she touched. Her heart was limitless in its goodness and our memories of her friendship and of her quiet, but endless service, will continue to give us the energy we need to carry on in her spirit.

Thank you, Mary. May you rest in peace.

Sally Milbury-Steen
July 14, 2019

Mary Starkweather-White Memorial Service
will be held August 31 at 2:00 pm at
Wilmington Friends Meetinghouse, 401 N. West Street, Wilmington, DE 19801

Mary Starkweather-White Online Memorial
Pacem in Terris will be setting up an online memorial for Mary. Please send your tribute, favorite memory or story (and photos) so we can add them to what you see here.

The Mary Starkweather-White Legacy Fund
has been established to support the continuation of Mary’s work in restorative justice. Donations can be made to the fund at the Pacem in Terris website.
Please designate your donation for the MSW Legacy Fund.