

Memorial Minute for Ruth Zweifler (Ann Arbor)

September 26, 1929 – January 12, 2025

Ruth Millicent LaPlace Zweifler was born in Palisades, New Jersey, in 1929 to Oscar and Minna LaPlace and shared her childhood with a brother, Maurice Allan LaPlace, and sister, Rosabelle Leifer. While a student at Bryn Mawr College, she began her journey as a Quaker, which eventually led to her spiritual home of many decades at Ann Arbor Friends Meeting. She married Dr. Andrew Zweifler in 1955, with whom she shared a rich life devoted to family, social justice, service, and community. Together they reared six children – John, Liz (Steve), Mark (Donna), Rhyan, Natanya, and Ylonda – and played a precious role in the upbringing of 16 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Ruth and Andy nurtured a family rooted in love, values, and a commitment to improving the world.

Ruth will be remembered for her formidable achievements and intellect, her love of birds, flowers, children's art, and opera. Her warmth, curiosity, and generosity supported many loved ones during their times of trouble with open arms and warm hospitality. As she was known to say, "The door is open and I don't have a gun." She was incredibly strong, shoveling snow, pulling weeds, and planting flowers in her garden well into her 90s. She had a restless spirit, deeply troubled by our world's very human failures, which led her to serve for 15 years on the Friends Meeting's committees on Peace and Social Concerns and the Palestine-Israel Action Group, which she hosted in her home for several years. She also served on the Committee on Ministry and Counsel, and Contributions (to outside organizations).

Ruth and Andy hosted, for about eight years, a Christmas feast and carol sing, accompanied on their lovely Steinway piano and by a pop-up "orchestra." The Zweifler home, with the sounds of birds in her garden and cheerful chattering of kids next door in the Angell School playground, was her dream of sanctuary for 65 years. This home, known to many as simply 1706, became akin to the soul of Ann Arbor, where the door was truly always open, with a steady stream of visitors and guests. It was a place of many meetings about peace and social justice, not to mention countless raucous parties, birthdays, holiday gatherings, weddings, and other celebrations.

Her special concern was in the realm of education, where she saw that children of color were disadvantaged in the public school system and worked to correct that. In 1975, she founded the Student Advocacy Center (SAC) to support and encourage young people who were marginalized; she served as its Executive Director until her retirement in 2004. Under Ruth's leadership, SAC successfully sued the Ann Arbor School District in 1977 in what has become known as the Black English case, claiming that the school failed to meet the educational needs of children because of their use of African American Vernacular English, or Ebonics. The decision established a precedent that recognized linguistic diversity and educational equity. Ruth always spoke uncomfortable truths to those in power. She was a fighter for the dismissed and oppressed, a spirited anti-racist activist, and a warrior against racial injustice, mass incarceration, and the brutal displacement of Palestinians. In 2003 Ruth was inducted into Michigan's Women's Hall of Fame, a testament to her unwavering dedication to improving the lives of children and families.

In very recent years Ruth said with some frequency, "I need a job! Can you find me a job?" But she had done her job and earned her rest, and her passing was a typical Zweifler event, with family and friends surrounding her with love.