

**A member of the influential New York Photo League in the 1940s, Sonia Handelman Meyer was rediscovered late in life. Her photos are still striking today.**



**Charlotte’s Arts & Sciences Council awarded Sonia Handelman Meyer their lifetime achievement award in 2016. She passed away Sept. 11 at 102. (Photo by Nancy Pierce for the Arts and Science Council)**

*by Michael Solender*

Back in 2006, Sonia Handelman Meyer made a chance discovery at Dilworth retailer Paper Skyscraper that led her on an overdue journey of renaissance and rediscovery. Handelman Meyer, a one-time member of the fabled New York Photo League, spied a postcard with a familiar black and white photograph of '50s folk singer Pete Seeger.

“Mom was friends with Seeger and the photo was one she took when he first began playing with the Weavers,” says Joe Meyer, Handelman Meyer’s son and a Charlotte-based commercial architect. “She picked up the postcard and the photo caption said, ‘photographer unknown.’ She got rightfully upset, and I decided to do something about it.”

Meyer took some of his mother's vintage prints, scanned them, and sent the images to Dot Hodges and Christie Taylor, owners of Hodges Taylor Art Consultancy in Charlotte. "I explained that Mom was a photographer and former member of the Photo League, had a great deal of work including negatives, and I asked for their advice. The next thing I knew, they arranged for a meeting and soon after, launched an exhibit, showing her work, with most of the images coming from more than 50-year-old negatives kept in a box under her bed."

Handelman Meyer's 2007 one-woman exhibition sponsored by Hodges Taylor, "Into the Light," was one of the most popular and well attended shows they'd ever hosted. The show introduced her to new audiences, catapulted Handelman Meyer into a national spotlight, and over the next two decades helped showcase her work in several prestigious collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Columbus Museum of Art, the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, New York City's Jewish Museum, Charlotte's Mint Museum and Bank of America's Corporate Collection. Her work is featured in the Henry Louis Gates' produced documentary film, "Making Black America" and the forthcoming documentary, "Radicalism in 1950's America," currently in production.

Handelman Meyer passed away peacefully on Sept. 11 in her adopted hometown of Charlotte (she relocated here in 2002). She was 102. She was preceded in death by her husband of 45 years, Jerome Meyer, a biomedical engineer and cardiac researcher at Cornell University Medical College in N.Y. She is survived by her son Joseph Meyer of Charlotte, his wife Dalia Rock, daughter Laurie Fortson of Ravena, Ohio, four grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren.



**From 1943 to 1951, the streets of New York City were the studio for Sonia Handelman Meyer as a member of the New York Photo League. (Photo by Sonia Handelman Meyer)**

Born in New Jersey and raised in Astoria, N.Y., in the '20s, a chance encounter in 1942 led to her fire for the power of photography. She was working as a civilian for the U.S. Army Signal Corp at Fort Buchanan in Puerto Rico.

“I met a young man working for the National Youth Administration taking pictures of the conditions,” recalled Meyer in an interview with Charlotte’s Arts & Sciences Council in 2016. The ASC awarded Handelman Meyer their Lifetime Achievement Award that year. “His photographs were beautiful and exposed things that needed to be changed. I knew immediately this was something I wanted to do.”

Upon her return to New York, Handelman Meyer joined the storied New York Photo League where she was a member from 1943 to 1951 and served as a photographer and secretary (the only paid position) of the cooperative. A self-styled group of change agents who sought to combat racism, poverty and civil rights issues through their photography, the Photo League's members included American photography heavyweights such as Sol Libsohn, Sid Grossman, Ansel Adams, Richard Avedon, Bernice Abbott and Walter Rosenblum.

## **Enduring images**

From the mid-'40s to the early 1950s, the streets of New York City were Handelman Meyer's studio. She navigated through Harlem, Spanish Harlem, and many of the city's impoverished neighborhoods to capture expressive reflections of daily life during a tumultuous period in American history. Many of her most enduring images are of the children at Harlem's Sydenham Hospital, the first racially integrated hospital in the city, where she volunteered.

That Handelman Meyer was able to capture such poignant images with basic, almost elementary camera gear and technology, reveals her special talents.

“She was so good,” says Carolyn DeMeritt, fine art photographer and former photography manager at Hodges Taylor Art Consultancy. DeMeritt, a longtime friend of Handelman Meyer's, initially met her while working on her solo exhibition in 2007. “In reviewing her negatives, I was stunned to see how few frames it took her to get a fabulous photo. Rarely was there more than one or two shots. Today with digital cameras, we take endless frames. Not Sonia. She could land the perfect shot in one take; her work is that good.”



**The photographs of Handelman Meyer poignant captured scenes of everyday life in New York City during the 1940s. (Photo by Sonia Handelman Meyer)**

When the New York Photo League ceased operations in 1951 following its placement on the McCarthy blacklist, Handelman Meyer put her professional career on hold to raise her family. Her later rediscovery and the pronounced interest in her work took her by great surprise and left her both puzzled and pleased people were attracted to her work after so many years.

“Sonia was proud of the work at the Photo League,” says DeMeritt. “Yet she felt when she stopped doing photography to raise her family and hadn’t published her work in top outlets of the day like Life and Look magazines, she wasn’t worthy of the attention. She absolutely was. Her work was stellar. It [the renewed attention] surprised her.”

Son Joe says he often observes people experiencing his mother's work from very close distances to interpret the nuances revealed in the images. "Sometimes people are mere inches away from the prints," says Meyer. "The work simply draws them in."

Handelman Meyer described her work style as driven by emotion. "As I walked the streets my eyes opened to what was there," said Handelman Meyer. "Instead of passing things by, I looked at them and I saw them for what they were. I never thought I was taking something away from the people. I felt I was revealing them."

*"The Photo Archives of Sonia Handelman Meyer" is on exhibit at Central Piedmont Community College at The Bill & Patty Gorelick Gallery through Dec. 9, 2022.*

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## **Other obituaries this week:**

Dorothy "Dot" Washam Bartlett, 96, of Mint Hill attended business school in Charlotte. She worked at Hudson hosiery and Chadbourn hosiery mills in Charlotte. Dot always raised a big garden, freezing and canning for her family. She loved to square dance and ballroom dance. She loved to fish, enjoyed horseback riding, and loved her horses and dogs.

Patrick "Pat" Edward Bowes, 64, of Matthews began his career in the insurance industry, working diligently to earn several designations: chartered property and casualty underwriter. He served as president of the Charlotte chapter and associate in risk management and certified risk manager. He continued his insurance career with Royal Sun Alliance and Wells Fargo and in 2018 ended his career as claims vice president at Sompo America. Pat loved playing golf with friends, detailing cars and going out to eat with his family.

Janet Claire McDonald Bradley, 88, of Charlotte was a teacher in the weekday school at Myers Park United Methodist Church. Janet was a gifted singer and an accomplished flutist.

Sarah “Sally” Farnsworth Clarke, 85, of Charlotte was a long-time member and supporter of Myers Park Baptist Church. Second only to her love of God was her love of music. Sally was the co-chair of the Oratorio Guild of Charlotte for a time. Sally’s other rewarding activities included participating in a garden club and being a Girl Scout leader. She became adept at sign language in order to sign for community events.

Currie Allen “Bud” Dail, 85, of Stanfield worked at Rodgers Builders in Charlotte, specializing in hospital renovations. Bud entered the U.S. Air Force at 17. He served for 20 years in hospital administration and retired as a technical sergeant. He enjoyed fishing, photography, gardening, woodworking and construction of all types. He later poured his talent into smaller projects such as birdhouses and wooden cross necklaces.

Hilda S. Dailey, 101, of Charlotte moved to Charlotte in 1949, where she retired as a supervisor in the medical unit of the welfare department. She was a lifelong Methodist.

Kelly Shamp Ferguson, 61, of Matthews had a great love of children that led her to a degree in early childhood development from UNC Charlotte. She became founder and owner of Carmel Children’s Center from 1991 through 2001, where she poured her love into developing children and watching them grow. Kelly loved walks on the beach with her dogs. She loved to create colorful flower arrangements and care for flowers outside her home. She had a knack for creating picture collages for her family and home. Country music made her heart sing and dance.

Rosey (Rose) Lee Hardin Graham, 93, of Charlotte started at Commercial Credit Corp. in Charlotte in 1949 and retired from there after more than 40 years. She studied business at King’s College. Rose spent time with various organizations: Daughters of the Nile, Fred Astaire Dance Studio, Order of the Eastern Star and Shepherd Center. Rose was faithful to Avondale Presbyterian Church in Charlotte.

Mary Lou Hildreth, 89, of Indian Trail was instrumental in the formation of the tribunal for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charlotte and she enjoyed a long career as its director. In recognition of her extraordinary service to the Catholic Church, Pope Benedict XVI bestowed upon her the Cross Pro Ecclesia Et Pontifice, the highest honor that can be awarded to laity by the Holy See. In 1996 she was invested as a Dame of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre. Mary was a longtime parishioner of the Cathedral of St. Patrick in Charlotte.

Bob Glenn James, 83, of Mooresville was a pharmaceutical representative in Charlotte and surrounding areas before his retirement. He was a graduate of UNC Charlotte class of 1973. Bob enjoyed helping others, training at the gym, hiking and reading.

Vick Jr. Lynn, 76, of Charlotte attended Mount Sinai AME Church in Charlotte, where he was an honorary member. Vick enjoyed a long career in the poultry and tractor-trailer driving industry.

Robert Allen Moore Jr., 73, of Richburg, S.C., started his company, R.A. Moore, Inc. in Charlotte in 1989, where he worked until his passing. He spent his high school and college summers as an engineering assistant at Big WAYS radio station in Charlotte. He would often reminisce about his job as a paperboy for the Charlotte Observer and the local celebrities he would serve. In his spare time, he enjoyed bush-hogging, tending crops, fishing and watching deer on his hobby farm. If he wasn't enjoying the beauty of the land, he was out looking for a good meal. You could often find him driving from the mountains to the beach just for dinner.

Fernando Ostrea Jr., 73, of Cary, worked in multiple states with his last place of employment being with ABC Supply in Charlotte. Fernando loved playing golf, traveling to the North Carolina mountains and being with his family.

Cathy Lynn Price, 58, of Charlotte was employed as a word processor at Wells Fargo in 1986 and continued with her career growth until 2012. Cathy was a 1982 graduate of Independence High School and received her associate's degree from Kings College in 1984. She was a fun and joyful person with her fashionable clothes, stylish hairpieces and bubbly personality.

Frances "Nancy" Sabo Puckett, 86, of Charlotte moved to Charlotte in 1978 and got involved with the local community, including holding a weekly craft show at Sharon Towers Retirement Center. She joined the Little Theater of Charlotte and held offices with the auxiliary. She joined the Salvation Army women's auxiliary and chaired and co-chaired for the ARC on Central Avenue. She volunteered for the Loaves and Fishes Program at Holy Comforter Episcopal and St. Vincent De Paul Catholic churches. She carried on her son's hobby of making jewelry out of old and heirloom silverware and traveled all over the Southeast attending craft shows to show her artistic and creative jewelry, keeping his dream alive. She went on yearly trips to Siesta Key, Fla., one of her favorite places. Nancy loved seashells and the beach.



James “Jim” Franklin Rich, 87, of Charlotte went to work for NCNB in 1968, now known as Bank of America, and continued there for 30 years until his retirement. Jim was a longtime little league baseball coach with Starclaire Athletic Association in Charlotte. He loved to fish, golf, travel and was an avid reader. In his later years, he enjoyed watching the Atlanta Braves, Charlotte Hornets and Carolina Panthers. He loved to sit in his sunroom and enjoy his backyard wildlife habitat.

Gladys Kay Stafford Ryals, 84, of Harrisburg worked as a key punch operator for over 24 years and became a working supervisor for Ceridian Corp., a division of IBM. Gladys was a graduate of West Mecklenburg High School in Charlotte, class of 1956. She enjoyed singing in church choirs, teaching Sunday school, Bible studies, reading, community services, crafts and yard sales.

Howard “Skip” Alan Severson, 75, of Charlotte started a career with Minnesota Fabrics and was transferred to Charlotte in 1982, where they were headquartered. In 1987, Skip worked for Cato Corporation, eventually becoming executive vice president of real estate until his retirement in 2011. Skip was drafted to go to Vietnam after graduating from college. He joined the Army and went on to officer candidate school.

Bradley Smith Jr., 80, of Charlotte opened Central Park Barber Shop in Charlotte and served customers there for 60 years before retiring in 2021. He was a member of Wilson Grove Baptist Church in Charlotte. He enjoyed boating, fishing, gardening and traveling. He had a lake house on Lake Tillery where he spent his free time and weekends. Upon his retirement, he sold his house in Charlotte and moved to the lake full time. Bradley served in the U.S. Army from 1965 to 1971.

Patricia (Voula) Triantis, 89, of Charlotte was an accomplished seamstress and worked many years in some of Charlotte’s finest boutiques. Her most cherished stewardship was crocheting baby blankets to be donated to the hospital. Voula was an active member of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Charlotte. She served several terms of office in both the Philoptochos and Daughters of Evrytania. Voula volunteered countless hours to the pastry sale and festival.

Victoria Novella Valentine, 63, of Charlotte moved to Charlotte in 1988 and secured employment as legal practice assistant at Moore & Van Allen Law firm, where she worked for

more than 30 years until an early retirement in October 2021. In the summer of 2020, Vicky joined Greater Galilee Baptist Church in Charlotte.

Wayne Kenneth Wellmon, 63, of Charlotte served as security guard supervisor in the Department of Housing and Residence Life at UNC Charlotte for 35 years. He taught Southern style Shaolin Kung-Fu for over 25 years. His school was Ying Lungs School of Chinese WuShu. He relished his walk with Christ, rock hounding for N.C. gems, the freedom of motorcycles, and playing pencil and paper and online role-playing games.

Ruth Jeanene Wilcox, 89, of Charlotte attended Queens College of Charlotte where she earned a bachelor's degree in business. Jeanene's constant devotion to meetings and encouragement at her AA and AL-Anon group was a large part of her life. She also enjoyed Christian fellowship with close friends.

*Ways of Life condensed obituaries are compiled by Darrell Horwitz, a Charlotte-based freelance writer who writes about sports, local news and restaurants. Reach him at [darrellhorwitz@gmail.com](mailto:darrellhorwitz@gmail.com)*

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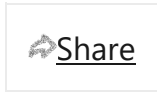
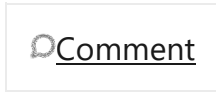
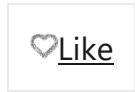
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