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Acknowledging Louise Priest, Grande Dame of Aquatics

Stephen J. Langendorfer, Editor
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One of the most influential aquatic professionals with whom I have had the great fortune of being associated is Louise Priest. A few weeks before I composed this essay, I had the wonderful opportunity to visit with Louise in Indiana. I realized that it had been a much too long span of at least 10–15 years since our last face-to-face meeting. We had a great chat, catching up with each other's lives over the past decade and a half. For me, at least, it was one of those happy occasions to reminisce and be back in touch; it seemed to me that Louise felt similarly.

The weekend after I visited Louise, I heard a homily in church during which the priest shared a story about a U.S. Navy fighter pilot who had been shot down and held prisoner of war for a number of years. Upon gaining his freedom, he became a motivational speaker of some note. A man of about his age approached him one day in disbelief and inquired if he was indeed the pilot. When the former fighter pilot acknowledged who he was, in return, he asked the man who he was and how did he know him. The man replied, "I was the seaman who *packed your parachute*. I guess the 'chute worked!" The priest used the story to convey to the congregation that there are many people in all of our lives who may have gone little noticed, but who "packed our parachutes" in large and small ways. He suggested that we also needed to be persons who daily packed other persons' parachutes with our small actions and good will.

I decided to write this brief tribute about Louise because she, in fact, was one of the many persons in my life who has "packed my parachute." I have realized for some time that I ought to acknowledge her kindness and support to a young rookie assistant professor over 30 years ago by sharing a few of the many contributions I know about her. If Louise reads this editorial, I hope she will not be offended at my characterization of her as a "Grande Dame," since the term may carry some negative connotations. Be assured that any uncomplimentary characterizations are not at all applicable to Louise who is down-to-earth, personable, passionate, and tireless in her promotion of aquatics and aquatic professionals.

Those of you who are new to the U.S. aquatics field in the past 20 years may not be familiar with Louise's name or her lifetime contributions to aquatics. In trying to identify what to write about her multitude of accomplishments, I decided that three major contributions with which I was familiar stood out and absolutely ought to be highlighted in print for contemporary readers. They each happen to be contributions to aquatics that had major impacts on my own professional life. In

different ways, they “packed my own parachute,” and I suspect packed the parachutes of many others in aquatics.

For many years, Louise worked for the American Red Cross, both as a volunteer and as a paid staffer. In that capacity, Louise drew upon her own personal and professional experiences to write *Adapted Aquatics* (1977); this text served for years as the standard for aquatic texts dealing with persons with different abilities. (Incidentally, I refer you to the media review at the end of this issue to read my comments on one of the ancestors of Louise’s ground-breaking tome in the form of Susan Grosse’s new text, *Aquatics for Children with Challenges*.)

From my perspective, *Adapted Aquatics* held two important distinctions. In its pages, Louise described one of the very first attempts to identify the teaching and learning of swimming as an individualized, developmental process. I drew heavily from those pages in my own *Aquatic Readiness* text 20 years later. I find it remarkable to note that in the very contemporary discussion of *water competence* that is going on internationally, one can identify the very roots of water competence in the five basic aquatic skills (i.e., entering the water, staying afloat, controlling breathing, changing body position, and switching direction of travel) that Louise posed as being the essence of being safe in the water. What were notable by their absence in *Aquatic Readiness* were detailed descriptions of formal swimming strokes such as front and back crawl or breaststroke, which often form the core of most other swimming books.

Perhaps the broadest contribution made by Louise Priest to aquatics in the U.S. was her leadership as the executive director of the Council for National Cooperation in Aquatics (CNCA). For at least the last several decades of CNCA’s existence (from 1950–1995), Louise was the lifeblood and soul of CNCA. She organized the annual conference, encouraged publications of critical aquatic texts that could not get published elsewhere, and she was the ultimate “statesperson” in trying to keep the myriad aquatic organizations (ranging from the American Red Cross, YMCA of the USA, YWCA, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, JCC, Jeff Ellis, to the USLA) on speaking terms and collaborating on necessary projects such as guidelines for conducting infant and preschool swim classes. During the 1980s and into the 1990s, she managed to acquire headquarters for CNCA in the Natatorium in Indianapolis from which she could operate the many CNCA functions and meetings.

The third critical contribution by Louise Priest was the founding of the *National Aquatic Journal*. The *NAJ*, as we took to calling it, became the first general aquatics periodical that was not exclusively about competitive swimming. It was a quarterly, published in 10 volumes over 10 years from 1986–1995 [Note: The National Swimming Pool Foundation has graciously scanned and published all issues of the *NAJ* on their website, www.nspf.org]. I was most fortunate to have been able to publish almost a dozen of my early papers in the *NAJ*. From those papers, I laid out the principles and thinking for what later became *Aquatic Readiness* and other swimming studies. These same papers formed the basis for my recognition and credibility within the aquatics field. Louise as Editor-in-Chief nurtured my writing and strongly encouraged my papers. Importantly, the *National Aquatic Journal* was the forerunner and immediate progenitor of the *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education (IJARE)*. I am convinced that its successful run for 10 years convinced Rainer Martens and Human Kinetics that a scholarly serial with a

mission focusing on noncompetitive aquatics and swimming could be successful and, in fact, was critical to the field of aquatics.

I hope readers can appreciate how much we in the aquatics world owe to Louise Priest and her many aquatic contributions. Louise: Thank you for all you have done and for what a great friend you have been and are! Thanks for having “packed my parachute” on so many occasions!

I suspect from my own recent communications with Louise that she would love to be in contact with more of her old colleagues and acquaintances. If you contact me with your email and telephone information, I will pass them along to Louise so she may be in touch with you (this is my standard means of making connections to avoid violating anyone’s privacy).