

Tribute to Isabella Callanan 1928 – 2008

By Betsy Shure Gross

The following tribute to Isabella Callanan is excerpted from remarks delivered by Betsy Shure Gross at the Friends of the Muddy River Annual Meeting, St. Paul's Church, Brookline, July 27, 2008. The tribute, in its entirety, may be seen on the Brookline GreenSpace Alliance website: brooklinegreenspace.org.

I am honored and deeply touched to be with you today to honor Isabella's work on behalf of her beloved Muddy River.

I remember Isabella's request, in the late 1970's, to come join her and a few colleagues at her home to talk about creating the Friends of the Muddy River.

At the time, there were only two "Friends of" groups in Brookline – the Friends of Hall's Pond founded by Jo Albrecht, and the Friends of Leverett Pond, co-founded by Arlene Mattison and myself. Isabella and I talked about how we now understood Frederick Law Olmsted's work in American cities and his building of these great parks as a reflection of his social optimism, agreeing that the Emerald Necklace reflects the best of FLO as artist, pragmatic park planner, social visionary and political realist. And we agreed we were bound and determined not to allow his great works to be "cobbled and botched" again.

Isabella was a well informed and passionate advocate for the Emerald Necklace and Muddy River programs. For twenty-eight years she was the conscience and the guide for the Friends of the Muddy River. She defended this urban resource with a mighty pen and a good bit of steel in her spine. Speaking "truth to power" was her watchword and it served the Friends well.

From the 1981 National Association for Olmsted Parks Conference in Boston, to the Massachusetts Association for Olmsted Parks creation in 1982, to the programs that established the Boston Park Rangers, to the advocacy for the 1983 and 1987 Open Space Bond Bill which funded \$32,000,000 for the state Olmsted Historic Landscape Preservation Program, to making the resulting Emerald Neckace Master Plan a living, implementable document, Isabella worked tirelessly.

In 1892, during the design phase of the Muddy River Improvement Plan (now known fondly as The Emerald Necklace), FLO wrote to his partners, "Nothing else compares in importance to us with the Boston work. . . . I would have you decline any business that would stand in the way of doing the best for Boston all the time "

It is poignant that over a century later, in the days just before she died, Isabella, too, was showing that nothing else compares in importance with the Boston work, since she was giving direction and assigning tasks about the Navy Band Concert on the banks of the Muddy River and grilling me about the Army Corps of Engineers plans and documents for the long planned for, long awaited, rehabilitation slated to begin next Spring – a full thirteen years after the devastating floods of October 1996!

Isabella's River spirit demands that we honor her legacy by carrying on the work already so well begun – and to preserve and restore the place of such enduring significance to her so that it will again serve as, as Olmsted said, "an oasis in the city."