

The QUEEN of CORVALLIS

IF YOU NEED SOMETHING DONE, CALL MARION GATHERCOAL.

BY MELISSA BEARNS

The Corvallis arts scene includes improv theater, numerous galleries, local music groups, performances galore and an arts organization that has served as a model for other communities nationwide: ArtCentric and The Corvallis Arts Center. An impressive accomplishment for a town where students make up a little less than half the population, it all started with Marion Gathercoal.

Born in 1911, Gathercoal has spent 65 of her 94 years in Corvallis. While that might seem like a long time to make your

sesses the rare ability to engage people, get them excited and involved in projects, then to stand back and watch the work get done.

"Marion is one of those unique people who has both the vision and the ability to get different people, sometimes vastly different people, to work together for a common goal," said Victoria Fridley, Executive Director of ArtCentric.

The year was 1960. Gathercoal had already been living in Corvallis 20 years, raising her children, heading up clubs, using her drama degree from Northwestern University to coordinate fund-raising pag-

Club, the oldest organization for women in the country. And she was looking for a project. "All my friends used to say, 'Don't go near Marion, she's got another project,'" Gathercoal said. "And I remember thinking, yeah, I'll get you."

Robert Mix, 87, was one of the many people Gathercoal "got" to help out with the Corvallis Arts Center. "Marion could recognize the talents of people who could make the contributions she needed," Mix said. "She smiles and speaks very softly. We live in quite an aggressive society and hers is the old-fashioned way. You catch more flies with honey than vinegar. But her sweetness was not syrupy, it was genuine. She was adept enough to take the reservoir of support [in the community] for the project and focus it into getting the arts center."

The doors officially opened in 1963. That summer, organizers for the National Community of Arts Councils invited Gathercoal to speak at their national convention in San Francisco about how she'd done it. Then the letters started to come from other organizers across the nation. "Please help us," they wrote. And she did, with advice, suggestions and ideas, her forte.

"When she enters a room, people just stop and look at her," said her son, Forrest Gathercoal. "There are people in the world doing great things who aren't getting covered in the press. But if we ever needed a story in the newspaper, my mother could get it in."

In photographs of ground-breakings, ribbon-cuttings and projects she worked on from start to finish, Gathercoal is decked out in stylish dresses, natty hats and gorgeous coats. It's easy to pick her out in the pictures: look for the well-dressed woman whose

poise and attitude draws your eye straight to her. "People ask me why I'm so dressed up," she said. "I'm not dressed up. I don't wear pants. I wear dresses, which for me is feminine, a part of being a woman. Now I have seen some beautifully tailored pants suits, and I think 'Maybe I should wear pants.' But no, I don't."

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Fashion maven Gathercoal has tucked away a collection of dresses, gowns and accoutrements that date as far back as the 1860s. Many were owned by her mother and her grandmother, and she puts those dresses to work. Over the last few decades Gathercoal has hosted numerous fashion shows to raise money for her causes. In the most recent show, *A Century of Fashion* held Oct. 5 in Corvallis' Majestic Theatre, friends and family donned hoop skirts, ball gowns, and lace-up boots to raise money for what is still her pet project: The Arts Center.

"Oh honey, I'm busy all the time, and I love it," she said in our first interview. "You wouldn't want to know me if I was treated like a little old lady."

It's hard to imagine that ever happening. Gathercoal draws her energy from a whirl of activity. The more she's doing, the more alive she feels. She maintains an elegant household, jokes about her 97-year-old husband feeding the squirrels on their balcony, and delights in serving tea and cookies to her guests. All her life, she has turned ideas into realities, and she's not about to stop now.

"I think the other part about Marion that I have found so powerful, is that she's a person who believes in dreaming big," Fridley said. "And she's convinced she can make dreams happen." ★

A model wearing one of Gathercoal's formal dresses from her NWU days.



MARION GATHERCOAL

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

mark, it takes a real mover and shaker to create a legacy like hers.

"Now you just listen," she said, her blue eyes twinkling as she raised a carefully manicured finger and pointed at me. "The easiest job in the world is to be president."

Sitting at the other end of the table, one of her two daughters laughed. In a tone that held no malice, she teased her mom. "Oh she's such a pushy little broad," Bonny Gathercoal Potter said. "No, seriously, she is." Persuasive might be a better word. People who've known Gathercoal for decades say she pos-

eants, and generally making a name for herself as one of the most civic-minded women in the town.

"When I was in college (at OSU), I knew she was OK because the *Gazette-Times* social page said she was," Potter said. When she had to list what her parents did on a form, Potter said she wrote 'land developer for dad and club woman for mom.' "She was the volunteer extraordinaire. That was her J-O-B."

In 1960, Gathercoal was president of the (now defunct) Corvallis Women's

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