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OBITUARY

Rest in peace, John Looney
Wadsworth social activist, 88, who dedicated life to nonviolence, dies of cancer
By Marilyn Miller
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Love was always the answer for peace activist John Townsend Looney -- universal, unconditional love.

The Wadsworth man was committed to nonviolence, social and racial justice. He had been active in the peace movement since 1950.

His motto in life was "to see what love can do."

Mr. Looney, who died of cancer Tuesday at the age of 88, founded the Northern Ohio office of the American Friends Service Committee in Akron -- a Quaker social action organization -- in 1973 and served as its director for 16 years. He also helped found the Akron Friends Meeting, Peace GROWS (GrassRoots Outreach Works) and Alternatives to Violence.

Described as a person who valued choices and had the utmost respect for others, Mr. Looney was known for his democratic approach and was never dictatorial.

"From the first time I could talk and understand, my dad emphasized the Golden Rule to 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' It was an important principle in our home," said his son, Mark Looney of New York.

He said his father never criticized people personally -- whether in public or in private -- but would occasionally criticize someone's political stance on an issue.

Mr. Looney, born and raised in Cleveland Heights, received a degree in mechanical engineering from Case School of Applied Science and his law degree from DePaul University in Chicago.

He met his future wife, Adele Schieble, when he attended his first Friends meeting in Chicago. Married 61 years, the couple had two children.

Early in his career, Mr. Looney worked in industry. He was employed at Cleveland Pneumatic Tool, worked as a plant engineer for Ohio Injector Company in Wadsworth and was a co-owner of Wadsworth Manufacturing.

He stepped up his social activism later in life.

He became so involved with organizing peace rallies throughout Ohio -- he worked for fair housing, church integration, racial justice training and full funding for public education -- that he sold his business and started working full time for AFSC out of his home.

He campaigned against the B-1 bomber. He worked to end the war in Vietnam. He began the Ohio Peace & Justice Calendar. He lobbied to end the nuclear arms race.

Mr. Looney was president of the Ohio Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign and served on its national board. Some called him a modern day Johnny Appleseed for peace and nonviolence.

His goal was to get one peace group in each of the 88 counties in Ohio, a goal he accomplished in the 1980s.

"He was my mentor," said Greg Coleridge, executive director of the American Friends Services. "He was the first person to help me see peace and nonviolence as not just goals to be sought, but to live. He lived what he advocated."

Coleridge said Mr. Looney always made people feel comfortable with his even temperament, genuine interest and delightful sense of humor.

“He encountered many people who were intense, passionate and even hostile in their beliefs. He didn't necessarily convert people, but he changed the tone, looking at their position and listening instead of arguing.”

Although Mr. Looney was the recipient of many awards, Coleridge said he remained humble.

“He never liked to take credit. Taking the spotlight and accolades were not his style. He shared the credit or passed it on. He always gave people their due, and was always so appreciative.”

He never practiced law, but he used his skills to be an effective orator and in his analysis and writing. He developed a course on nonviolent conflict called Alternatives to Violence, and authored the book, The Media's Social Responsibility, on the media's role in society.

Mark Looney said his father's activism afforded him and his sister, Marcia Hartman of New Concord, opportunities they would otherwise never have had -- from understanding the effectiveness of a peace march to learning about people from other races and cultures, who sometimes stayed in their home.

He also instilled in his children the need to fight for racial and social justice.

“His spirit will always be with me when I'm on a picket line, demonstrating, handing out a flyer or asking someone to sign a petition,” Mark Looney said. “My father's dream was of a better America and a better world.”

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