



JEAN (KILMARTIN) COPPINGER BILLERICA CIVIC HALL OF FAME INDUCTION CLASS OF 2023

As a teacher in the Billerica Public Schools, Jean (Kilmartin) Coppinger proved to be an extraordinary special education pioneer. In 1976, she organized one of the first early-intervention programs in the country for children from birth to age 3 who were at risk for or experiencing developmental delays.

Recognizing an acute need to immediately help these children contending with various special needs involving physical, emotional, or cognitive development, Jean sprung into action while earning an early-intervention teaching accreditation from Boston College. From a federal education grant for which she applied, her efforts led to the creation of Project BEAM (Billerica Early Assistance Model), which serves young children by promoting growth and development of basic life skills as well as support services for their parents.

Organizing her fellow Billerica special ed teachers to make home visits at the start, Jean, a mother of seven children herself, eventually helped shape BEAM into both an at-home as well as center-based program in which trained specialists work with infants and toddlers to promote the development of skills and foster positive parent-child interactions. In the 1980's, BEAM became one of nowadays several community-based early intervention programs funded by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Prior to that, however, Jean was lauded by then-President Jimmy Carter with a letter of recognition congratulating her on creating such a valuable resource for the community through federal grants and thanking her for providing such a model program for the rest of the nation to follow.

A colleague of Jean's shared what it was like to work alongside such a visionary: "She was a person with a plan and great integrity. . . . It was such a pleasure to work with Jean and learn from her on a daily basis. When a family was having difficulties making decisions or just coping, Jean would drop everything and give that family her day. She would visit the family and give them encouragement, search for resources, make calls for them, and lighten their otherwise heavy load."





Having passed far too young at the age of 61 in 1992, Jean, who earned her undergraduate degree at Lowell State Teachers College and master's from the University of Lowell, has previously been immortalized by close friend and local artist Helen Potter as the subject of "The Mother's Garden" sculpture located on the grounds of the historic Howe School building. Dedicated in 2009, the statue depicts a woman wearing 19th-century garb reading a book presumed to children. The book bares the Project BEAM logo on the cover. Fittingly, Jean also served on the Howe School revitalization committee when it was originally designated as the future site of a town museum.

Residents of the town for more than five decades, Jean and her husband John, who passed away in 2015, were deeply involved in the Billerica community, raising their family in North Billerica.

