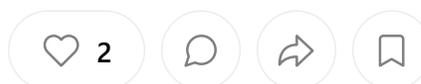


WAYS OF LIFE

Ways of Life: A celebrated photographer who sought to capture social issues in her images

Also remembered: An educator who founded Carmel Children's Center; a longtime security guard supervisor at UNC Charlotte; the owner of Central Park Barber Shop

🔒 Sep 27



You're reading Ways of Life, a weekly obituaries newsletter from The Charlotte Ledger honoring our friends, neighbors and family members who made an impact on Charlotte through the ways they lived their lives.

***Editor's note:** This issue of Ways of Life is being sent to all Charlotte Ledger members. If you'd prefer not to receive future editions of this newsletter, you can adjust your preferences on the ['My Account' page](#).*

Δ member of the influential New York Photo League in the



Charlotte’s Arts & Sciences Council awarded Sonia Handelman Meyer their lifetime achievement award in 2016. She passed away Sept. 11 at 102. (Photo by Nancy Pierce for the Arts and Science Council)

by Michael Solender

Back in 2006, Sonia Handelman Meyer made a chance discovery at Dilworth retailer Paper Skyscraper that led her on an overdue journey of renaissance and rediscovery. Handelman Meyer, a one-time member of the fabled New York Photo League, spied a postcard with a familiar black and white photograph of '50s folk singer Pete Seeger.

“Mom was friends with Seeger and the photo was one she took when he first began playing with the Weavers,” says Joe Meyer, Handelman Meyer’s son and a Charlotte-based commercial architect. “She picked up the postcard and the photo caption said, ‘photographer unknown.’ She got rightfully upset, and I decided to do something about it.”

Meyer took some of his mother’s vintage prints, scanned them, and sent the images to Dot Hodges and Christie Taylor, owners of Hodges Taylor Art Consultancy in Charlotte.

“I explained that Mom was a photographer and former member of the Photo League, had a great deal of work including negatives, and I asked for their advice. The next thing I knew, they arranged for a meeting and soon after, launched an exhibit, showing her work, with most of the images coming from more than 50-year-old negatives kept in a box under her bed.”

Handelman Meyer’s 2007 one-woman exhibition sponsored by Hodges Taylor, “Into the Light,” was one of the most popular and well attended shows they’d ever hosted. The show introduced her to new audiences, catapulted Handelman Meyer into a national spotlight, and over the next two decades helped showcase her work in several prestigious collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Columbus Museum of Art, the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, New York City’s Jewish Museum, Charlotte’s Mint Museum and Bank of America’s Corporate Collection. Her work is featured in the Henry Louis Gates’ produced documentary film, “Making Black America” and the forthcoming documentary, “Radicalism in 1950’s America,” currently in production.

Handelman Meyer passed away peacefully on Sept. 11 in her adopted hometown of Charlotte (she relocated here in 2002). She was 102. She was preceded in death by her husband of 45 years, Jerome Meyer, a biomedical engineer and cardiac researcher at Cornell University Medical College in N.Y. She is survived by her son Joseph Meyer of Charlotte, his wife Dalia Rock, daughter Laurie Fortson of Ravenna, Ohio, four grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren.



From 1943 to 1951, the streets of New York City were the studio for Sonia Handelman Meyer as a member of the New York Photo League. (Photo by Sonia Handelman Meyer)

Born in New Jersey and raised in Astoria, N.Y., in the '20s, a chance encounter in 1942 led to her fire for the power of photography. She was working as a civilian for the U.S. Army Signal Corp at Fort Buchanan in Puerto Rico.

“I met a young man working for the National Youth Administration taking pictures of the conditions,” recalled Meyer in an interview with Charlotte’s Arts & Sciences Council in 2016. The ASC awarded Handelman Meyer their Lifetime Achievement Award that

year. “His photographs were beautiful and exposed things that needed to be changed. I knew immediately this was something I wanted to do.”

Upon her return to New York, Handelman Meyer joined the storied New York Photo League where she was a member from 1943 to 1951 and served as a photographer and secretary (the only paid position) of the cooperative. A self-styled group of change agents who sought to combat racism, poverty and civil rights issues through their photography, the Photo League’s members included American photography heavyweights such as Sol Libsohn, Sid Grossman, Ansel Adams, Richard Avedon, Bernice Abbott and Walter Rosenblum.

Enduring images

From the mid-’40s to the early 1950s, the streets of New York City were Handelman Meyer’s studio. She navigated through Harlem, Spanish Harlem, and many of the city’s impoverished neighborhoods to capture expressive reflections of daily life during a tumultuous period in American history. Many of her most enduring images are of the children at Harlem’s Sydenham Hospital, the first racially integrated hospital in the city, where she volunteered.

That Handelman Meyer was able to capture such poignant images with basic, almost elementary camera gear and technology, reveals her special talents.

“She was so good,” says Carolyn DeMeritt, fine art photographer and former photography manager at Hodges Taylor Art Consultancy. DeMeritt, a longtime friend of Handelman Meyer’s, initially met her while working on her solo exhibition in 2007. “In reviewing her negatives, I was stunned to see how few frames it took her to get a fabulous photo. Rarely was there more than one or two shots. Today with digital cameras, we take endless frames. Not Sonia. She could land the perfect shot in one take; her work is that good.”



The photographs of Handelman Meyer poignant captured scenes of everyday life in New York City during the 1940s. (Photo by Sonia Handelman Meyer)

When the New York Photo League ceased operations in 1951 following its placement on the McCarthy blacklist, Handelman Meyer put her professional career on hold to raise her family. Her later rediscovery and the pronounced interest in her work took her by great surprise and left her both puzzled and pleased people were attracted to her work after so many years.

“Sonia was proud of the work at the Photo League,” says DeMeritt. “Yet she felt when

she stopped doing photography to raise her family and hadn't published her work in top outlets of the day like Life and Look magazines, she wasn't worthy of the attention. She absolutely was. Her work was stellar. It [the renewed attention] surprised her."

Son Joe says he often observes people experiencing his mother's work from very close distances to interpret the nuances revealed in the images. "Sometimes people are mere inches away from the prints," says Meyer. "The work simply draws them in."

Handelman Meyer described her work style as driven by emotion. "As I walked the streets my eyes opened to what was there," said Handelman Meyer. "Instead of passing things by, I looked at them and I saw them for what they were. I never thought I was taking something away from the people. I felt I was revealing them."

"The Photo Archives of Sonia Handelman Meyer" is on exhibit at Central Piedmont Community College at The Bill & Patty Gorelick Gallery through Dec. 9, 2022.

Michael J. Solender is a Charlotte-based features writer. Reach him at michaelsolender@gmail.com or through his website, michaeljwrites.com.

Other obituaries this week:

Dorothy "Dot" Washam Bartlett, 96, of Mint Hill attended business school in Charlotte. She worked at Hudson hosiery and Chadbourn hosiery mills in Charlotte. Dot always raised a big garden, freezing and canning for her family. She loved to square dance and ballroom dance. She loved to fish, enjoyed horseback riding, and loved her horses and dogs.

Patrick "Pat" Edward Bowes, 64, of Matthews began his career in the insurance industry, working diligently to earn several designations: chartered property and casualty underwriter. He served as president of the Charlotte chapter and associate in risk management and certified risk manager. He continued his insurance career with Royal Sun Alliance and Wells Fargo and in 2018 ended his career as claims vice president at Sampo America. Pat loved playing golf with friends, detailing cars and