

Elizabeth Campbell

1902-

Arlington

Founder of Educational Television



Elizabeth Pfohl Campbell, the eldest child of Bishop J. Kenneth Pfohl and his wife Bessie, was born on December 4, 1902, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. As a child, she had wanted to become a minister like her father, but the Moravian Church, an evangelical protestant denomination with roots in Germany, did not allow women to enter the ministry. Instead, Elizabeth channeled her desire to help others into a teaching career. She graduated with honors from Salem College in Winston-Salem and earned her Masters degree from Columbia University Teachers College in New York. She returned to Salem to teach high school English at her alma mater. Her skill as an educator was recognized early and in 1926, Elizabeth was promoted to teach college-level courses in English and literature at Salem College. In her mid-twenties she served as Dean of Women at Moravian College for Women in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. In 1929, Pfohl was hired by Mary Baldwin College in Staunton to serve as dean. There she met Edmund Campbell, a lawyer who served on the college's Board of Trustees. After a short courtship with this widower and father of two, they married and settled in Arlington. In 1941, Elizabeth gave birth to twin boys. Over the next few years, Elizabeth began her career as an education activist. One of her first achievements in this realm was to co-found the Rock Spring Cooperative Nursery School in Arlington, which is still operating today. Having helped lead an effort to allow Arlington County to elect its school board, in 1948, she became the first woman elected to a Virginia school board. Campbell served three terms on the board, the latter two as the chairperson. She is also well known for establishing kindergartens, fine arts programs for African-American students, and the first special education program in Arlington County, and was active in the struggle to integrate schools. Her roles as mother, educator, and activist merged as she realized the possibilities that television had as an educational medium in the late 1950s. She became the major unpaid force behind creating a public television station that would provide educational programming for the nation's capital. In 1957, Campbell founded and became president of the Greater Washington Educational Television Association, the organization that led to the creation of WETA-TV and its radio affiliate, WETA-FM. Her dreams of integrating education and television were realized in 1961 when WETA broadcast its first program. Since then, WETA has grown to become the third largest station in the Public Broadcasting System. Well into her 90s, Elizabeth Campbell continues to serve as Vice President for Community Affairs, the liaison between the station and its audience. Her energy and vision have been recognized across the country through five honorary doctorates and 50 broadcasting and communication awards, including the "Ralph Lowell Award" for outstanding individual contributions to public television and the "First Ladies Salute to First Women" from Hillary Rodham Clinton and the National First Ladies Library. WETA has produced a 30-minute documentary on her that aired on December 16, 1999.