



About Dr. Gertrude A. Barber

Gertrude Barber was well known in Pennsylvania and throughout the United States for her advocacy on behalf of children with intellectual disabilities and their families. She took up the mission when, as an assistant supervisor in the Erie School District, she had to tell parents of children with special needs that services were not available for their children in their community. She was deeply affected as she saw parents face the options of either keeping their children at home without access to an education and training, or sending them to a distant institution.

Dr. Barber became determined to find another way. She believed that all individuals, regardless of their disability, have unique gifts to offer, and have the right to live to their fullest potential. The idea that children with disabilities could be educated and reside in their own communities was largely unheard of in the early 1950s. Dr. Barber began meeting with parents and, in 1952, opened the first class for children with intellectual disabilities in a room borrowed from the YMCA. She soon initiated classes for children with vision and hearing impairments, and opened training programs for adults with intellectual disabilities at locations around Erie.

In 1958, with the discovery of the polio vaccine, the City of Erie closed its former communicable disease hospital located on Erie's east

ANNE-MARIE WELSH
DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS
Office 814.824.1167
Cell 814.746.6889
amwelsh@ErieRCD.org

MARY SOLBERG
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS
Office 814.824.1171
Cell 814.969.1844
msolberg@ErieRCD.org

bayfront and leased the facility that would become the Barber Center. According to Dr. Barber, her students at last had, “the first place we could really call home.”

Dr. Barber’s commitment to her service was founded in a deep devotion to her Catholic faith, fostered since childhood. Gertrude was born in Erie on Sept. 16, 1911, to Kathryn Cantwell Barber, a recent immigrant from Ireland, and John Barber. Her father died in the flu epidemic of 1918, leaving her mother to care for Gertrude, her two sisters and five brothers.

Dr. Barber grew up in the shadow of St. Ann’s Church, attending the parish school and continuing as a parish member all of her life. She attended Villa Maria Academy and Edinboro Normal School (now Edinboro University) before earning a bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degree from the Pennsylvania State University.

She became a teacher in the Erie School District in 1931 during the height of the Great Depression, and moved into roles as school psychologist and administrator. She continued with the Erie School District until 1971, when she resigned to become the full-time administrator at the Barber Center.

Dr. Barber oversaw the expansion of services that span the lifetime, from early intervention services for infants and toddlers to the opening of a center for adults in their senior years. She also responded to requests from locations throughout the state, opening residential group homes and adult day services in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh regions.

During her lifetime, Dr. Barber received scores of educational, civic and religious awards and recognitions. But the title she valued most was “teacher,” as she continued to inspire acceptance of persons with disabilities in all parts of society. She wrote the Barber National Institute philosophy: “All persons are children of God ...with feelings, emotions, needs and capabilities unique to these persons and their heritage. In a world where all persons differ, everyone should have the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential.”

Dr. Barber died suddenly on April 29, 2000, as the Barber Center was in the midst of a capital campaign to build a new school and state-of-the-art training center. Her legacy continues to be carried out today as 3,900 employees statewide provide a range of services for more than 7,200 children and adults with autism, intellectual and physical disabilities and behavioral health challenges and their families.