

FRUGALITY WAS HER MIDDLE NAME BUT CHARITY IS LEGACY

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Almost nobody who knew Dorothy Melamerson knew that behind that facade of a coupon-clipping retiree dwelled a millionaire.

Melamerson spent her working life as a teacher in the Chicago public schools, an occupation never known as a breeding ground for wealth.

She lived her final years in a studio apartment whose furnishings one friend says could only be characterized as shabby. The only new item she bought for her home in recent years, another friend recalls, was a valance for the windows.

Ask people to describe her and one word they're sure to use is frugal.

So frugal, by one account, that when she vacuumed she plugged an extension cord into an outlet in the hall outside her condo to save money on electricity.

So frugal that after she became ill she sometimes walked 3 miles to her doctors' appointments, partly for the exercise but also to save cab fare.

So frugal that in the last months of her life, when the cancer and the chemo had debilitated her, she refused to hire help.

So frugal that when she died last March, at the age of 74, she left an estate worth more than \$1 million.

"You could have knocked me over with a feather," says Mary Mick, a real estate agent who, though she was at Melamerson's death bed, didn't realize her friend was anything more than a retired schoolteacher on a budget until she heard the news that Melamerson had bequeathed \$900,000 to the Chicago Park District.

If you heard the Park District's announcement this week of its plans to spend Melamerson's money improving parks and creating sports programs on Chicago's Near North Side, you might have had visions of an eccentric woman devoted to needlepoint, cats and afternoon soaps.

You would have been wrong.

In the 1940s, when she began her career as a gym teacher, Miss Melamerson was a heartthrob for more than one pre-pubescent boy and an adventuresome heroine to more than a few little girls.

At Stone Elementary School, she taught boys and girls alike to throw a softball, to shoot a basketball, to run, to move their growing bodies.

Larry Hochberg, the president of the Sportmart sporting goods chain, credits her with inspiring him to athletic heights he was sure he'd never conquer—climbing to the ceiling on a pole in the gym.

Stuart Strongin, a Chicago attorney, remembers that when he was 11 years old and stood 6-foot-5, she realized the damage that could be done to a boy who felt like a freak. She kept him after school and helped him work on his coordination.

At the beginning of each school year, students eagerly awaited stories of her summer, when she would return with a glamorous tan and tales of distant travels.

Yet Melamerson was always a gregarious loner. In those Ozzie and Harriet times, she didn't marry.

"She was from that school where you took care of yourself and did for others and didn't expect anybody to take care of you," says Hochberg.

It was with that mentality that she set about quietly amassing a fortune she would give away.

After her retirement in 1977, Melamerson began to study money. She read newspapers, talked to brokers, analyzed company prospectuses and consulted with her longtime attorney, Scott Levenfeld.

"I told her she could enjoy this money more," says Levenfeld, the trustee of her estate. "But it wasn't something she was used to, and what she wanted to do was be outside. She loved the sun, loved bicycle riding, loved being in the community, walking around, riding around. You didn't need a lot of money to do that. I learned to stop arguing with her."

In the end, with no family nearby, she specified that her money be used for parks in the 43rd Ward, near her home in a Lincoln Park high-rise.

It should be noted that the generous gym teacher was frugal until two days before she died. Lying in a hospice, imagining wrongly that she would soon be home, she lamented to her friend Mary Mick that she had none of a special food supplement in stock. Mick promised to buy some in preparation for her return.

"No, don't do that," Melamerson scolded. "I have a coupon at home that will save 50 cents."

