



[Willard on Water, Community, and Service](#)

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At 86, she may have been the oldest person in the room. Regardless of age, or perhaps in some ways because of it, she was the most intimately familiar with the waterways of Springfield.

“She” is Ms. Jean Willard. Growing up on her father’s farm in North Springfield, she learned the lay of the land, understood deeply how the waters run and the importance of maintaining a clean water supply.

Pictured: Jean Willard outside Selectman’s meeting room

Ms. Willard brought more than knowledge from her youth to the Select Board at that meeting. She brought facts. It was clear she had carefully reviewed the documents related to the biomass project. She brought up potential conflicts with the proposal and the [official town plan](#); required credentials that don’t appear to be being met by the project’s engineers; and the chemicals that will be injected into the land and aquifer area. She seemed unimpressed by the suggestion of one selectman that there was a possibility to inject the chemicals directly into the town’s sewer system so they “wouldn’t go in the ground”

At the end of her [presentation](#), Willard implored the Board to “Please think about the value of drinking water. Make a decision to take it to the Public Service Board that you are concerned about what this plant will do to our only water source.”

As I watched her carefully navigate the stairs to leave, I realized how determined she must have been to even make it to the third floor meeting.

Upon arriving at the town hall, we had all been greeted with a note stuck to the door: ‘Elevator out of Service. Sorry for any inconvenience’. With three flights of steep stairs, the lack of an elevator could mean a virtual lock-out for some citizens. Cane in hand, she had made her way up each flight, step by step... slowly but surely. I was soon to learn that this approach is nothing new to Ms. Willard.

Intrigued by her determination and passion, I called her up. Following is a partial transcript of our conversation.

Jean Willard

You are very passionate about the water quality issues in North Springfield- what drives you to spend your time researching and talking to town officials?

J.W.: I’ve always been involved in public affairs. I served on the school board for four years, and with the town nine years. I always felt that if you are representing, you had a responsibility to know what the issues are. Whatever I did, I tried to get as much knowledge as possible.

In my experience, that is not true for everyone. During the town negotiations with Wheelabrator, [NH-VT Solid Waste Project], the town did not even have a copy of the agreement! I made sure we got a copy right away- and I read all of it.

Jean said she served with the town sometime in the late “1980’s-ish”, and some of that time was spent with two of the current Select Board members. She didn’t think she should name them.

Jean also serves with the North Springfield Preservation Society.

The school board wanted to sell the North School property for development. Since the beginning of the 1900’s, that has been the only recreation land in that area. We worked hard to ensure it stayed that way. It took a long time, but we were finally able to purchase it and preserve it. The Parks and Rec department has first dibs on the rec fields and in exchange they maintain it, just like they did when it was still a school.

Perseverance and Service

I was a dance and yoga instructor for 27 years.

Yoga? You must have been a bit of a pioneer in this area.

She chuckled and replied: *In my early 40's, I had to learn to walk again. I had four children, the two youngest were still in diapers, when I suddenly could not walk or use my hands. They think it may have been effects from Guillain-Barre Syndrome.*

It was a really difficult time- and it gave me incentive to work. My husband was a very kind man and helped out whenever he could. While he worked, we had to have helpers care for the children. I didn't want anyone else to raise my children.

One of my friends was the local dance teacher. I asked her if I could take ballet exercises- and, well, she didn't say no [laughs]. She put up with my clumsiness very patiently. I slowly got better.

I worked with the youth at our church and we started using choreographed dance. It was one of the best teaching tools- you had to remember the notes, what to do, and feel the character. We had a sacred dance choir and the older students performed in four different states.

The church sent me to Castleton, along with the pastor's wife, for dance lessons. She was taking several classes and since I was sitting up there, I decided to take a yoga class. I ended up teaching beginner to advanced yoga.

The land, the water and hopes for the town's future

I asked Jean what she sees as the biggest asset for the community.

With no hesitation, she responded: *The people.*

What are your hopes for the town's future?

Number One: Biomass does not belong on top of our aquifer. My father owned that land- he farmed it. I'm very familiar with the topography up there. My father was a college-educated farmer, but he didn't just take agricultural courses, he took all the sciences- like geology. We would often talk about the lands. I learned that the whole region used to be a lake. There is a wide strip of sand – right about where they are planning to put this plant.

At the Select Board meeting, Select Board member Mr. Yesman mentioned an offer he had made to set up a private meeting between Ms. Willard and Mr. Ingold, the Sr. Technical Director for the biomass project. Mr. Yesman indicated that the only reason it wasn't set up was because Ms. Willard insisted on having other people present. I asked her what she thought of that offer.

JW: Number One: It would not be legal.

After being Chairman of the Executive Committee of the NH-VT Solid Waste Project- I learned that you do not go into private meetings without a witness.

This was one of the first things I had to battle as a Selectman. They were having an awful lot of executive sessions. They were not happy, but if they wanted to go into executive session and it wasn't legal, I would tell them so. It didn't make me the most popular.

The first meeting I went to, it was explained to me exactly how I should vote. I listened to them and then I looked into all the information- and voted the way I felt would be the best.

I think they sometimes forget they are representing all the people of the community.

It Takes a Village – Then and Now

J.W.: Back then, North Springfield was its own town. We became incorporated about 1950's. We had our own school, own fire department. It was a very good fire department. They were all volunteers- just about every able bodied man in town had gone through the training. They actually beat the Springfield Fire Department to the Edna Brown fire.

That must have been a real bonding experience- to have all the men trained as volunteer fire fighters.

J.W.: It was a pretty tight community. There were 19 children within this area- all the parents were responsible for the children if they were in their yard. Everyone knew each other. My oldest son says they could never get away with anything. It was a good neighborhood to bring up children.

Are there things you wish were different now?

I don't know my neighbors as well as I'd like. Mostly the age difference, I think. And I don't get out as much anymore.

There was warmth and unity of that [earlier] time. Most of the work was done by volunteers- we had a very strong JC [Junior Chamber of Commerce], several of them were state officers. They were really strong young men and they did a lot. My husband was one of them, along with Bob Dufresne and a whole bunch of others.

You waved to everybody and always made a point of smiling at everybody who went by. There isn't that unity now.

There was also much more respect for the churches. At one point, the men were working in the factories seven days per week, around the clock. They didn't get a chance to go to church. So, the churches and people got together and asked the factories if they could go in later on Sunday- and they agreed. There was more cooperation- it was a real inter-community action.

Do you think there is any chance to recapture some of that sense of unity and warmth?

I don't know. We didn't have TV... Didn't have computers that sort of thing. We didn't have the distractions. During war, we didn't have the cars to ride around in, so had to walk everywhere.

You can see glimpses of it when there's an emergency or when people come together to help somebody that needs it.

I think sometimes maybe people are afraid to be friendly with strangers. ...With good reason! It's too bad you have to be that way, but really you have to teach your children not to be too trustworthy to strangers. I never really had to put up with that.

When I was younger, we lived on a hill farm in Townsend. My brother and I were the fifth generation to live there. You knew everybody. And everybody knew that if they came to the farm, they'd get a free meal. Usually they would offer to work and get a sack of potatoes.

People today cannot imagine what it was like during the depression years. Everybody on the farm had to work just to survive. We didn't have much, but we were able to grow or make everything we needed- berries, milk, we made our own butter.

There was always room for somebody- whoever dropped by the farm. We canned a lot. Mother could always open a can to accommodate a guest. We were taught to always respect the people who came to the house. Some were not too clean, some in ragged clothes. They were always treated the same as everyone else.

Maybe that's something we don't have enough of, is respect for other people.

Legacies

Both my parents were very active in state and town politics. My mother served as the Regional Director for the Women's Farm Bureau. She was sent to Europe three times for international conferences. The last trip was just before the war started. While she was there, people were removing stained glass windows from some of the cathedrals in Belgium and Holland. It's the only way some of them survived.

I was brought up to believe freedom isn't free- it is everyone's responsibility to make a contribution to society and the people around them.

*My great grandfather built keystone bridges in southern Vermont- double-arch stone bridges. He fought in the civil war. After he died, they placed an epitaph in his honor on a bridge, now in the Townsend Historical Society. It says: "**James Follett: man of God, builder of bridges and men**"*

That's a lot to live up to.

What would you like to be remembered for?

For having worked with children and youth and that I cared about people and my community. [a thoughtful pause] And no matter how old you are, or how young, there is a meaning to your life and a purpose for it. Remember that each of us has a gift - maybe more than one - we have a place on this earth and a mission to complete.

Thank you, Jean. Your words and your dedication to serving the community are an inspiration. And, if I may say so 'That is a lot to live up to!'