

# Pleasant Valley's Penny Hickman passes, leaving a hole in sporting community

Bill Conners – Poughkeepsie Journal – January 27, 2021

At a time when more women are picking up a fishing rod or a gun and heading outside to spend time afield with family and friends, Dutchess County's sporting community has suffered a palpable loss.

One of our trailblazers passed away in recent weeks. Her passing has left us with a hole in our hearts and a void that will not be easily filled.

Penny Hickman of Pleasant Valley served in so many capacities in sporting organizations that it is almost an impossible task to capture all of them on paper.

She died at the age of 78 after a brief illness, according to her obituary.



Hickman was a trailblazer, although she didn't see herself as such. She was an officer of Deer Search, Inc. for more than 30 years — serving as president of the organization for many of them.

She was a director of the Federation of Dutchess County Fish and Game Clubs for many years, and one of the first officers of the Conservation Awareness Foundation. She spent many years as the Foundation's President. She was one of the people that formed the not-for-profit that focuses on conservation education, introducing children to hunting/fishing and feeding the needy with venison harvested in the region.

She was inducted to the Dutchess County Sports Museum Hall of Fame and eventually served on its board of directors.

At times she was the only woman serving on those boards. Yet, in all the years I knew her I can't recall her ever saying "I was the first woman," or "the only woman." She saw her involvement as simply doing that which she enjoyed.

A former Pleasant Valley Town supervisor, she was a partner to her husband, Don Hickman, one of the founders of Deer Search. Together, they owned Von Dem Jaegerheim Kennels, where they bred and trained wirehaired Dachshunds. The little dogs are one of the most popular breeds used for tracking wounded deer and bears here in New York, though they are popular in other regions, too.

Barbara Schmidt, a fellow Deer Search member and longtime friend of Penny's, tells a story that took place more than 30 years ago. I think anyone would have enjoyed watching the story unfold:

It took place in the mid-1980s, here in Dutchess County. A call came into Deer Search dispatch from a hunter who had shot and wounded a deer. He explained that he needed, "One of those people with the dogs to come out and track my deer."

You have to know that when his "rescuers" showed up on the scene he was not prepared for what he saw. Since both of their husbands had already responded to another call for help, Barbara and Penny decided they would take care of this latest call themselves. They packed up their gear, got one of their dogs and set out to meet up with the hunter and his companions.

The scene that unfolded probably would not happen today. The hunter and his buddies acted as though it was all a setup. Two women and a pint-sized dog sent to track a wounded deer? They were probably expecting a burly woodsman and a bloodhound. As Schmidt tells the story, they acted as though they had been roped into some bizarre episode of "Candid Camera."

The two female trackers, led by the pint-sized Dachshund, bulldogged their way through the underbrush and undergrowth, even losing a boot to thigh-high muck. They eventually tracked the deer to where it had collapsed in a nearby swamp. That hunter and his deer ended up looking at the world through a different lens.

After Don Hickman passed, Penny continued her affiliation with Deer Search and spent many years as the organization's president.

Penny was a familiar face each Spring at Morgan Lake in Poughkeepsie during the Get Hooked on Fishing Weekend. Each Fall she organized food services for the annual Junior Hunter Pheasant Hunt in Milan. Between the two programs she shared her enthusiasm with thousands of children.

When Hunters Helping the Hungry came to Dutchess County 1994, she didn't just help launch the program, but helped grow it into one of the most successful venison donation programs in the state for the needy, run entirely by volunteers. Enough meat has been processed, packaged, and distributed to provide more than a half-million meals. The success of the program in large measure can be attributed to her compassion and energy.

When Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner Basil Seggos recently said that women are a vital and fast-growing segment of New York's outdoor recreation community, he may not have known it, but he was talking about Penny Hickman. Not because she was new to that community, but because she was contributing to its growth.

As her good friend Anthony Pittore said, "When she walked into a room — any room — it immediately lit up." Pittore is chairman of the Dutchess Federation's board. He said that knew that when she shot her typical greeting, "Hey, you little turkey," at him, it was game on!