

Deborah May Wiatt

Activist, Community Supporter, and Census Taker

The U.S. Census Bureau is proud of its history of working with different components of the American diaspora to ensure an accurate picture of the people of the United States. In 1880, once the Census Bureau began using professional enumerators (instead of U.S. marshals) to collect data, it sought to hire people who were a part of the communities they counted. For this reason, the Census Bureau has always embraced the hiring of a diverse workforce and census work was often one of the few government jobs open to minorities and marginalized people.



The Pantagraph (Bloomington, IL) November 1, 1994

By SCOTT RICHARDSON
Pantagraph staff

A desire for better housing, a choice of career over marriage and more openness toward gays may lie behind a steep rise in single adults living together in McLean County, experts say.

Unmarried partners occupied 81 percent more homes in McLean County in 2000 than a decade ago, according to Census 2000 figures released today. Most of those people were unmarried men and women living together. Statistics also revealed a nine-fold increase in male-male and female-female residences.

Experts attribute some of the rise in same-sex households to platonic, informal partnerships to share costs.

But Twin City human rights activists say part of the increase also reflects a response by gay couples to a national call from homosexual rights organizations to stand up and be counted during the census.

The Pantagraph (Bloomington, IL) June 20, 2001.

Deborah May Wiatt was born on July 30, 1951, in Moline, Illinois. Deborah's father, Joseph, started working as an inspector at a steel plant soon after Deborah was born and he remained there for over thirty years. Her mother, Dorothy, worked as a bookkeeper and secretary for two local radio stations. In 1969, Deborah graduated from United Town High School in Moline, and soon moved on to Illinois State University. While at college, Deborah also worked at a restaurant, however, she soon found that her passion lay mostly in helping others and confronting injustice and inequality. A strong feminist, Deborah joined the National Organization for Women (NOW), and became active in her local chapter. Deborah worked with the group in support of the Equal Rights Amendment, wage equity, and workplace safety, and to support victims of sexual violence. In 1974, Deborah attended her regional NOW conference, followed by the national NOW conference in 1975, and held several leadership positions in her local chapter.

One of the areas Deborah felt most strongly about was preventing sexual violence and helping the victims of those crimes. Noticing a lack of resources in her community, Deborah helped found the McLean County Rape Crisis Center (RCC) in 1974, and over the next several decades became known as one of the most active sexual violence victim supporters in the state and region. The RCC recognized that sexual violence could happen to anyone and ensured that there were male volunteers available to assist male victims—one of the few centers to do so. Deborah and the RCC also helped to dispel common misconceptions about same-sex sexual violence. The RCC functioned as an all-volunteer 24-hour hotline, providing resources, peer counseling, and most importantly a safe and understanding environment for victims.



The Pantagraph (Bloomington, IL) September 6, 1992

While breaking new ground in the effort to stop sexual violence, the RCC encountered several roadblocks. The first was getting information about their services to the public, which they did through word of mouth, press activities, and stickers in places like women's restrooms. Another problem was volunteer burnout. Until the RCC integrated pagers and coordinated with another crisis call center based at Illinois State University, the center needed volunteers to attend the phone 24 hours a day, 7 days a week or risk missing a call. Those problems, in addition to the stress of guiding people through traumatic experiences, led to high turnover and other issues within the fledgling program. To alleviate the burden, Deborah created educational materials and programs helping to establish other crisis centers while avoiding the problems encountered in the RCC. The RCC went on to lobby for social change through community education programs and efforts to pass laws preventing sexual violence and protecting victims.



The Pantagraph (Bloomington, IL)
May 1, 1977.

Deborah also volunteered at an alternative all-volunteer newspaper geared towards social activism, and worked as a pioneer in the fight for gay and lesbian rights in Central Illinois. Describing her experience of being bullied while leaving lesbian establishments, as well as being fired from one her jobs for her sexual orientation, she said "until all of us are free, none of us are free." Deborah advocated for the legal protection of gays and lesbians, and celebrated a victory when the Town of Normal, IL passed ordinances prohibiting discrimination for housing and employment based on sexual orientation in 2001.

One further way that Deborah helped her community was as a civil servant when she began working for the Census Bureau in conjunction with the 2000 Decennial Census. The Bloomington Local Census Office opened on September 1, 1999, and continued operations until September 11, 2000. These operations not only included the principal enumeration which started on April 1, 2000, and was primarily mailout/mailback, but also included pre-

enumeration activities like canvassing neighborhoods to ensure correct addresses and add new dwellings, community outreach activities to ensure maximum participation, and post-enumeration follow-up activities which mainly focused on non-response followups and quality checks.

In 1980, the Census Bureau had added the option "partner" or "roommate" to classify the relationship of unmarried couples, gay or straight, living together. Previous censuses only included "border" or "lodger" for non-family, non-employee members. In 1990, the Census Bureau added the option for "unmarried partner," and the 2000 Census marked the first time the Census Bureau issued a report with the number of unmarried same-sex couples living together. The report showed 594,000 same-sex households, or 1-in-9 of the total unmarried partner households. The Census Bureau has continued to refine methods for counting same-sex partnerships with the introduction of a similar question on the annual American Community Survey in 2005, offering a greater chance for communities to receive support and representation.

Unfortunately, Deborah's census work would be one of her last contributions to her community, as she passed away unexpectedly on November 21, 2001, while visiting her family for Thanksgiving. The Census Bureau is grateful for her contributions to the Census Bureau and her community.

Deborah Wiatt

Memorial services for Deborah May Wiatt, 50, Bloomington, Ill., formerly of East Moline, are 2 p.m. Saturday at Schroder Mortuary, Silvis, and 3:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Unitarian Church, Bloomington.

Burial will be at a later date. There is no visitation. Memorials may be made to the Rape Crisis Center through PATH in Bloomington.

She died Wednesday, Nov. 21, 2001, at Illini Hospital, Silvis.

She was born July 30, 1951, in Moline, the daughter of Joseph and Dorothy Nicholson Wiatt.

She was employed as a census taker for the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Dispatch (Moline, IL) November 23, 2001.

Local Census office retains busy level

With less than a month of major Census 2000 activity remaining, Bloomington's 13-county regional office is the most productive in a three-state area, its manager said.

Census takers have contacted more than half of the 67,000 houses that did not return Census questionnaires earlier this year. With about 44 percent of those homes remaining, Bloomington's regional office has the best rate among 45 offices in Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin, regional manager Mike Fitzgerald said Tuesday.

Door-to-door follow-up by enumerators will continue until the middle of June, Fitzgerald said. After that, Census officials will make random accuracy checks among the various regional offices.

The Pantagraph (Bloomington, IL) May 17, 2000.