

Who Are These People and Why Was an Award Named After Them? Mary Wells (Mary W. Wells Memorial Diversity Award)

Dianne S. Lennon (NJ), Past National President, 1995

Geraldine "Gerri" Peeples, Minority Network Committee Chair, 1990-91

NEAFCS now pays tribute to Mary Wells, the 42nd and first African American National President, with the **Mary W. Wells Memorial Diversity Award**, given annually to recognize outstanding efforts and accomplishments of individuals and/or teams in diversity and pluralism in Extension education programming.

Dianne Lennon provided these cherished thoughts of Mary Wells. "In 1992, Mary recruited me to travel with her to Germany to attend the International Federation for Home Economics. Mary was inquisitive about global cultures as she strongly promoted the progress of humanity. Sessions of the Congress enriched us professionally while a visit to a family farm left us amazed upon seeing the cattle housed in a structure attached to the house, thus the German way of life. Our tour guide advised against travelling with too much luggage. Mary kept it simple with one huge piece, a few millimeters smaller than a trunk. That seemed like an okay idea until it was time for us to transport our luggage across the city, then numerous flights of stairs to board the train to Berlin for a post tour. The struggle was tremendous; however, Mary persevered, laughing and tugging. It was necessary to turn back and help her down the final 20-step staircase as we had only 10 minutes to board the train. Mary never discussed her health challenges with cancer which claimed her life at the young age of 60. I learned about them following her death on March 25, 1996. In retrospect, I could have, should have . . . Even today, I smile, even laugh when I recall our experiences in Germany. Those cherished, enjoyable moments with Mary strengthened our bond of friendship".



Mary H. Wells, the NAEHE immediate past president, highlights the 1991 Annual Session and says -- "Don't miss it in '92, Washington, D.C."

"Mary W. Wells ranks among the pioneers of our Association," as Geraldine "Gerri" Peeples defines her legacy. "Mary Wells was the leader for just such a time — to become the 42nd National President and first African American to lead the NAEHE organization in 1990 - 91. Her professionalism in previous roles as National Secretary (1986-88) and President-Elect (1989-1990) demonstrated to all curious observers that she would represent professional EHE's with class and grace. Her classiness was an integral part of her make up. God granted her an extra measure of grace to help her face the few unkind acts when they occurred — and grace to welcome and acknowledge the genuine collegial support from many more of NAEHE's leaders during her term."

Wells was elected President-Elect at the Annual Conference in Honolulu, Hawaii and took the reins of President at the 1990 Annual Conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In an article published in The Times, she stated, "looking forward to continuing the direction that (the) NAEHE is taking, which is an emphasis on global interaction. Our emphasis is on multi-cultural interaction — global interactions. That's one of the reasons we went to Hawaii. The theme for the '90's is Global Connections. You can no longer just stay in your own little world."

In her president's report for the pre-Board meeting, she wrote, "Change — to meet the challenges of the 21st century is needed." Mary was a vehicle for strengthening cultural diversity, an initiative being spearheaded by Cooperative Extension Service. She extended her reach by complimenting the Southern Region who invited the membership of 80+ members of the Puerto Rico Extension Home Economists to the meeting. She expressed thanks to the Regional Director and stated, we "draw a circle that took them in."

Mary strategically guided the 3,000 member NAEHE organization with extraordinary strength, ability and commitment befitting the highest standard of service. Minority members were extremely proud of her as well the acts of inclusiveness during the early '90's, as it was time for change.

Two retired members were asked to share remembrances of Mary W. Wells:

Sandra "Skip" Henderson (VA) described Mary as "a woman ahead of her time in terms of being a champion for women's rights. She was never short for words, always articulate and poised with diplomacy. Her dress spoke to her profession. Some thought she owned Extension, as she was aggressive but in control."

Darsene Baggett (NJ), recalls Mary as "dedicated, hardworking, and intelligent. She was more than just a member but one who was deeply involved with a focus on bettering the profession, the Association, and its members."

Wells received her degree in home economics education from Virginia State College and a Masters from Hampton University. She became an Extension agent immediately following graduation, and then worked 34 years in Isle of Wight County, Virginia Tech. After retiring from Extension, she pursued another career in real estate and within a short time was initiated into the Million Dollar Club in sales.