

Joan Uppington Williams Oehser
6 August 1928 - 18 January 2008

Joan Oehser lived a life of continual commitment to Friends' beliefs and principles, and of active efforts to further both. She was one of the stalwarts of this Meeting for forty years. As the Ministry and Worship Committee minuted on learning of her planned absence in 1985: "Joan Oehser's rich spiritual presence and her work on causes that concern Friends . . . will be greatly missed."

Born in Pennsylvania, Joan moved to Washington as a teenager and was an enthusiastic member of the Lutheran Church of the Reformation. During her first year at Swarthmore College, however, she experienced what she described as "the typical bewilderment, doubt, and rejection of religion." Participation in the Friends worship group there and many discussions with Friends both within and without the school drew her into Quakerism, so that when she returned to Washington after graduation she began attending worship at this Meeting. She found true fellowship in the Young Friends group, which she clerked for a year before moving to Philadelphia to work with AFSC, prompted by her growing commitment to pacifism. Joan applied for membership here while living in Philadelphia and was approved in the January 1952 Meeting for Business. At this time her mother was also a member of FMW. Joan began studies in applied social studies at Western Reserve University in 1952 and in 1956 married Gordon V. Oehser under the care of this Meeting. The couple's only child, Thomas Arthur, was born in 1962, the same year that the Oehsers divorced.

Her life continued its pattern of change and commitment. Returning to Washington by 1956 she worked as Associate Secretary of the Meeting ("office manager, guide and counselor to the Meeting Secretary, friend to all the world," to quote the July 1957 newsletter) until her resignation in 1957 for a job at an insurance company while her husband attended college. The couple moved to Berkeley, California, in 1958 and Joan transferred her membership to the Berkeley Society of Friends (although she also regularly attended the Friends Church there). With the break-up of her marriage, Joan returned to the city and meeting she always referred to in her many letters as "home" in 1964 and transferred her membership back to FMW.

Friend Joan's life at this Meeting in the 1960s to '80s was an active one, serving on FMW committees (Ushers, Nominating, Social Order, Ministry and Worship, Personal Aid) and BYM committees (Aging, Program). She helped coordinate the many activities at Quaker House in 1971 and this Meeting's 50th Anniversary commemoration. She was one of the organizers of our Mid-Week Worship meeting in 1981. She served as Assistant Clerk of Potomac Half-Yearly Meeting in 1985. Her letters to individuals and organs of the Meeting, contained in her personal file, show a deep and thoughtful concern for our community on a wide range of issues.

In 1986-88 she lived in Baltimore to nurse her aged mother.

The 1980s saw Joan begin a continuous effort to avoid paying federal taxes for fear that her money would be used for military purposes. As she wrote in 1983: "I have been a Christian all my life and a member of the Religious Society of Friends for about 30 years. I cannot conscientiously participate in military activities by payment of taxes used for that purpose. Such

participation is inconsistent with my religious conviction.” Fully supported by this Meeting, Friend Joan left her work at AARP to become a domestic worker for our elderly member Oliver Stone. This allowed her to live below the level of taxable income and to have no federal income tax withheld for her salary.

When Oliver Stone died in 1992 she continued working intermittently, but faithfully refused to pay federal taxes. For this she was fined by the IRS, in spite of vigorous representation by Meeting member J. E. McNeil.

Joan’s health began to deteriorate about this time, a condition exacerbated by her low income. In the early 2000s she moved to Friends’ House in Sandy Spring, Maryland; she worshipped with the Friendship Preparative Meeting but continued a lively and probing relationship with FMW. She endured several emergency trips to the hospital in these last years but friendly visitors reported her in good spirits and interested in Meeting news. “I was surprised how sharp her mind was,” wrote one in 2005. “It was sad, as she wanted me to stay.... [w]e were talking about ‘old times at FMW’ and people we knew in common. It was hard leaving her.”

Joan slowly faded in these last years, and she died in 2008. Her memorial meeting was held in this meetinghouse.