

## TWO MISSOURIANS WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE

By Michael Sherraden

Within the space of a few days recently, Missouri and the nation lost two important people. June brought the deaths of Rep. Bill Emerson, a Missouri Republican, and Justine Petersen, managing director of the St. Louis Reinvestment Corp.

In many ways, Emerson and Petersen did not have much in common. He represented a rural district; she lived in St. Louis. He was a political conservative; she a community activist. He liked the music of John Philip Sousa; she the Grateful Dead. He worked in impressive government buildings in Washington, D.C.; she in makeshift offices in St. Louis neighborhoods. Indeed, Emerson and Petersen would probably be surprised to see their names associated with one another on the same page. But I knew them both and worked closely with them both, and in their fundamental beliefs and daily actions, they had a great deal in common.

Both believed with deep conviction that ordinary people, including the poor, can lead lives of dignity, satisfaction and contribution if they have a reasonable opportunity. Both were leaders in making this happen, not through charity alone, but through community development and asset building. Both would have subscribed to the old Chinese proverb about enabling people to weave a net so they can catch their own fish.

Emerson, as the ranking member of the former House Select Committee on Hunger, sponsored many legislative proposals not only on hunger relief but on microenterprise and other community development initiatives. With Rep. Tony Hall, an Ohio Democrat, he wrote in 1991 the first federal legislation calling for individual development accounts, a matched savings program for the poor, to be used for education, home ownership and business capitalization. This bill, in several different versions, has survived in Washington. President Bill Clinton included it in his 1994 welfare reform proposals, and Sens. Dan Coats, an Indiana Republican, and Carol Moseley-Braun, an Illinois Democrat, reintroduced it in the current Congress. Recently, Coats and Rep. John Kasich, an Ohio Republican, included it in a major anti-poverty proposal. Emerson exemplified a constructive, people-oriented, bipartisan style that was highly regarded in his congressional district and among his colleagues in Washington.

Petersen was one of the nation's pathbreaking organizers in community reinvestment. Working for ACORN in the 1980s and early 1990s, she negotiated hundreds of millions of dollars in lending packages for low-income and minority home ownership in St. Louis. She believed that the large banks, which had abandoned the poorest neighborhoods, could learn to serve these areas and also make a profit in doing so. Petersen was justifiably proud that the loans she created had, and continue to have, extraordinarily low default rates. To protect against default, she pioneered the use of an escrow savings account with monthly deposits to be used in case of family emergency.

In her position with the St. Louis Reinvestment Corp., Petersen designed a plan to expand this savings mechanism to create individual development accounts, with matching savings deposits from corporations, foundations and others in the St. Louis community. This concept will be a model for other reinvestment initiatives across the country. Petersen was loved and cherished by thousands of St. Louisans whose families and communities benefited from her work.

My liberal friends did not always have the most flattering words to say about Emerson. They disagreed with his voting record on environmental issues and corporate tax breaks. My conservative friends were often critical of Petersen. She was so direct, they said. She raised a ruckus with the banks, and she didn't wear the right clothes. But in both cases, people should have looked beyond surface impressions and simplistic political categories.

Emerson and Petersen did not call much attention to themselves. Considering what they accomplished, they did not receive much fanfare or recognition. They just went about their work. They had a clearer vision and more determination than most of us. They believed in the strength of the people, ordinary people, urban and rural, white and black. They used their lives to act decisively on this fundamental belief. They taught us that everyone is part of the community, everyone is worth investing in, and there is something that each of us can do.

These are lessons of enduring value. In a season of posturing, image-making, and negativism, we can look to their work of hope and genuine substance. We can honor the lives of Bill Emerson and Justine Petersen by trying as best we can to carry on where they left off.

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