

# The Ethel N. Kelley Memorial Award

The woman behind the name and recognition.

By Stephanie Bouchard



When the Maine Municipal Association was founded in November 1936, one of its first hires was an 18-year-old by the name of Ethel Nichols. Nichols, who everyone called Kelley at her insistence after she married Charles Kelley in 1943, worked for the association until her death in 1981.

In the 43 years she worked at MMA, she became synonymous with the organization. Her importance to MMA and her impact on municipal government in Maine carries on today through what some call the Heisman Trophy of the municipal world – MMA’s annual Ethel N. Kelley Memorial Award.

## Early days

In November 1936, when Maine became the first New England state to form a municipal association prior to World War II, the infant organization set up space in Hallowell’s City Hall and set out to make its first hires. Paramount was finding someone with the personality and abilities to answer the phone and handle whatever came her way in the office. Kelley was well suited to the girl Friday role.

Without a full-time executive in the beginning of the organization, Kelley often had numerous responsibilities, ranging from answering the telephone to organizing and formatting the association’s magazine, then called the *New England Townsman* because it went not just to Maine municipalities, but to municipalities in other New England states, too.

“She really was the foundation of the association,” said John Salisbury, who was MMA’s executive director from 1966 to 1979. Besides taking calls from municipal leaders across the state and keeping the office running, Kelley sometimes stepped in as the de facto executive during transitions, he said. During World War II when the men were in the service, she kept the organization going.

“She represented the continuity of the organization over the many years,” he said. “She knew every municipal official in the state.”

While her official job title may have been “receptionist,” “She was far more than that,” said John Melrose, who worked at MMA from 1974 to 1981 in community development and government relations. “She was right in the inner workings of the machinery of the organization.”

With Kelley’s deep institutional knowledge and firsthand relationships with municipal employees in towns and cities across the state, “To some extent,” Melrose said, “she symbolized the whole institution.”

## Paying tribute

In the years after Kelley’s death at age 61 in 1981, MMA did not forget her or her contributions to the as-

About the Author: Stephanie Bouchard is a freelance writer from Nobleboro and regular contributor to Maine Town & City. [stephanie@stephaniebouchard.net](mailto:stephanie@stephaniebouchard.net)

sociation and municipal government. In preparation of MMA's fiftieth anniversary in 1986, the organization's executive leadership tapped past presidents to come up with ideas to celebrate. One of the ideas they came up with was to honor and commemorate the woman who had "devoted her adult life" to MMA, said Chris Lockwood, MMA's executive director from 1979 to 2015, by establishing an annual award.

"It was felt that it would be a real tribute to (her)," said Lockwood. With that goal in mind, the Ethel N. Kelley Memorial Award criteria were set to reflect who Kelley was: "The person who does the work without seeking any recognition whatsoever, and just gets the job done, maybe with very few resources at (their) disposal and (who is) selfless . . . and dedicated," Lockwood said.

The award is given to one person each year. Typically, about 10 nominations come in each year, said Theresa Chavarie, the now-retired manager of member relations who provided support to the award selection committee throughout her 33 years at MMA. The committee is made up of three past MMA presidents who review the nomination application and letters of support in September.

Usually, the people who are nominated don't know they've been nominated, and the person who the committee chooses is kept close to the vest until the award is announced at the annual convention in October, Chavarie said.

While the award is not monetary, she said, "it's pretty prestigious to be named and to receive (it)."

### **The Heisman Trophy of municipal government**

When Judy Akers, the town clerk in Poland for nearly 50 years, was named the recipient of the Ethel N. Kelley Memorial Award in 2022, she wasn't really aware of its prestige, she said, then someone told her it was so special, it was like the Heisman Trophy.

Getting the award when she did was especially meaningful because Akers's father, who had himself worked for the town of Poland, died right before she got the award, but she was able to tell him about it before he passed.

"He was thrilled," she said. The award held significance for him not just because his daughter was being honored but because their family has worked in various capacities for the town for generations, she said. "I had said at the time that my family had given over 200 years of service to the town of Poland," she said.

"It was a nice compliment to me that the association recognized my years of service."

Being recognized for the work put in in service to the community is gratifying, said Kathy Littlefield, recipient of the award in 2017.

A lot of times, she said, people in town don't realize all the effort it takes to serve the community. There's a lot of work to be done and somebody has to do it, she said. "You can't sit home and complain," she said.

Littlefield did not sit home and complain. She served on the select board in Waldo for 53 years before retiring earlier this year.

When she received the Ethel N. Kelley Memorial Award, she was not expecting it. "I was very appreciative of that recognition," she said. "I wasn't looking for it, but boy, when you get something like that, you think, well, maybe it was all worth my time and effort."

"Sometimes, I feel like I'm not deserving of all of that," she added. "I just did my job. But I'm very grateful for the (award) and I'm very grateful that I think some of my service helped people in town."

To be selected as the recipient of the Ethel N. Kelley Memorial Award truly is an honor, said last year's recipient, Mark Hathaway, Bangor's chief of police. "This award is a big deal," he said. "If you look at the list of previous recipients, there's a diverse, interesting mix of people that have been selected."

Like other award recipients, Hathaway credits the support of other people in his ability to serve his community well. "I don't know that awards measure (an individual's) success because awards really are, nearly in every instance, a team effort, but awards do make you feel good," he said. "I am forever an Ethel N. Kelley award winner, and I am eternally grateful for that."

MMA is accepting nominations for the 2025 Ethel N. Kelley Memorial Award until 5 p.m. on Friday, August 22. For more information on the nomination and application process, please visit <https://www.memun.org/About/Awards>, or use the QR code. 🏔️

