

Susan Feingold, Educator and Head Start Pioneer 1924-2020

The life of Susan Feingold, whose childhood experience as a refugee kindled a lifelong dedication to the education and wellbeing of New York's most vulnerable young children, was celebrated by hundreds of families, colleagues, and community leaders at a Zoom memorial service on Thursday, December 17, which would have been her 96th birthday. She died at her upper-West Side home on September 27. Susan Feingold served for 40 years as the founding director of the Bloomingdale Family Program, a much-honored early childhood program that was one of the models for the national Head Start program.

Her many years of service and accomplishment were celebrated by community and civic leaders, educators, social workers, and alumni families for whom she was a role model and a voice for social justice. Among the speakers at the Zoom gathering was Patrick Gaspard, a Bloomingdale Head Start alumnus, who served in the Obama Administration as Ambassador to South Africa and who went on to serve as president of the Open Society Foundation. Civic leaders who spoke at the memorial included Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and former Borough President Ruth Messinger. Also sharing memories of Susan Feingold was New York singer-songwriter Suzanne Vega, whose family was part of the Bloomingdale community,

Under Susan Feingold's leadership, Bloomingdale's Head Start program developed a strong focus on serving children with learning and socio-emotional needs, providing therapeutic preventive services that enables their success in school and beyond. Her vision won the support of national foundations and individual donors, whose financial support enabled Bloomingdale to extend its services well beyond the traditional Head Start model.

Susan Feingold was part of the founding committee of mothers who came together in 1960 to create the Bloomindale Family Program to provide educational and recreational programs for underserved

children. A key goal of the founders was to forge connections among families of the many racial and economic backgrounds who lived in Bloomingdale's Manhattan Valley neighborhood but who rarely interacted with each other. Beginning with a summer outdoor program in Riverside Park staffed primarily by volunteer parents, Bloomingdale then created an educational program for young children that met during the school year in space donated first by a neighborhood community center and in subsequent years by local churches. While the children took part in learning activities led by volunteer early childhood teachers, their parents met in an adjacent room to share parenting concerns and address community issues. Within a few years Bloomingdale was able to win a multi-year demonstration grant from the Ford Foundation, providing salaries for its staff for the first time. In 1965 Susan became Bloomingdale's first Director. During this period Bloomingdale attracted the attention of planners in Washington D.C. who were developing what would become the national Head Start program, and who saw the Bloomingdale program as a model for the parent engagement they wanted to build into the new program. When Head Start was launched in 1967, Bloomingdale became a Head Start program and has been one ever since. Today Bloomingdale serves children ages 2, 3, and 4, in its early childhood centers at 987 Columbus Avenue and 125 West 107th Street.

Susan retired as Executive Director in 2008. In her long career she won many honors and was a fearless voice in behalf of children and families. In 2009, Bank Street College of Education awarded her an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters. In its award, the college cited Susan's "lifelong fight against discrimination of any kind, and the energy, passion and conviction she brought to her work on behalf of thousands of children." The award noted "her deep and continuing involvement with Head Start, for which the Bloomingdale Family Program provided the model," and said that under Susan's leadership "Bloomingdale has become a nationally and internationally recognized model, an exemplary program serving hundreds of young children and their families on Manhattan's West Side each year." The citation stated that Susan's "strong voice and persistent advocacy have influenced policy makers and educators, reminding all of us that the pre-kindergarten years are a crucial period for children's intellectual growth and deserve our attention and investment. "

Susan's fearless support of vulnerable children and families grew out of her own experience as a child of Jewish parents growing up in Germany in the 1930s. As oppression of Jews grew increasingly dire, Susan's parents sent her out of Germany via the *kindertransport*, which brought unaccompanied Jewish children to safety in English foster homes. In 2015 she recorded an account of her refugee experience for the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC in which she underscored how her own childhood experience of discrimination and loss motivated her lifelong work in behalf of disadvantaged children here.

Susan's long marriage to Lester Feingold, a theater director and teacher, ended with his death in 2013. Their daughter, Lisa, died in 2000. There are no other immediate survivors.