

A SPACE for Healing

Rita Landino,'64, devoted her career to supporting the Southern community. She continues the tradition with a gift made in memory of four alumnae heroines of Sandy Hook Elementary School.

By Natalie Missakian

IN **THE 1980S,** long before the #MeToo movement sparked a national conversation on sexual harassment and assault, Rita Landino, '64, started a program at Southern to assist survivors.

For much of her 35-year career — first as an English professor and later as a counselor — she championed women's causes on campus, helping launch both the university Women's Center and a union advocacy group for female faculty members.

"We sought to provide places for women students and faculty to feel safe, and also where they could be celebrated for their contributions to campus life," says the emeritus of counseling services, who retired in 2001.

So when Landino learned about plans for the SCSU Sandy Hook Alumnae Remembrance Garden in memory of four educators killed in the Dec. 14, 2012, elementary school shooting in Newtown, Conn., she knew she could get behind it, feeling a special bond with her fallen "sister educators."

"My heart went out to the parents of the children who were murdered, but I also often thought about the adults involved. There hasn't been a lot of focus on them," says Landino, who contributed $50,000 to support the project.

Of the six educators killed in the tragedy, four attended Southern — among them Mary Sherlach, M.S. '90, 6th Yr. '92, a fellow school psychologist who began her career in North Haven, Conn., where Landino lives. The others include: Dawn Lafferty Hochsprung, M.S. '97, 6th Yr. '98, who was the principal of Sandy Hook Elementary; special education teacher Anne Marie Murphy, M.S. '08; and first-grade teacher Victoria Soto, M.S. '13. Soto, who was working on her master's in special education, was awarded an honorary degree posthumously. The four educators died trying to protect their students from the gunman. In recognition of their heroism, Southern posthumously presented the Distinguished Alumnae Award to them in 2013.

Landino has long supported her alma mater. She previously established a scholarship in her family's name for students studying to become English teachers. More recently, she approached Southern about a gift to memorialize her son Michael, who died tragically in a 2011 car crash at age 21.

THE MORE SHE LEARNED about the remembrance garden project and its purpose, the more convinced she became that it was the perfect channel for her philanthropy, she says. "For me, this memorial takes the pain of my personal grief, and my more general grief over the deaths of my sister educators, and transforms it into a monument of beauty and memory," she says of the project, which was dedicated in a ceremony on May 4.

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Situated on a hill overlooking the pond behind Morrill Hall, the garden's location holds special meaning for Landino. Her 1964 commencement ceremony took place there, and years later, her office overlooked the same spot. "I used to look out my window every spring and fall to watch the Canada geese stop to eat and drink before continuing on their journey," she recalls.

Her gift went primarily toward the garden's centerpiece: a circular, softly illuminated wooden sculpture that stands as a tribute and memorial to the four women. The sculpture's design stems from the vision of Southern alumna Carlene Barnes, '13, the winner of a 2013 design competition. Plans for the memorial picked up steam when President Joe Bertolino arrived on campus three years later, says William Faraclas, professor of public health and one of the leaders of the project. "Rita's contribution made it possible for us to fulfill our dream," says Faraclas. "Unquestionably it made the difference between us going forward or having to defer until a future time."

Landino says she was particularly impressed with Bertolino's vision of the garden as a symbol of compassion, one of his five core values of social justice. (The others include dignity, respect, civility, and kindness.) The garden was designed by the Julie Moir Messervy Design Studio, an award-winning firm with a portfolio that includes the acclaimed Toronto Music Garden, inspired by Bach. Maine-based yacht builder Brooklin Boat Yard was enlisted to create the sculpture, using the same methods boat makers employ to preserve and treat wooden sea crafts. Facing the sculpture is a semicircular bench, designed pro bono by Bloom Design and built primarily by students from Eli Whitney Technical High School. The seating area is partly surrounded by hedges, creating a place for peaceful contemplation and protection.

The sentiments align well with Landino's work as a counselor who created safe spaces for students. In addition to launching programs for survivors of sexual abuse, she was one of the first to establish supportive places on campus for students identifying as LGBTQ. "She really connected very, very well with students," recalls Faraclas, who worked with Landino and considers her a friend. "She had a very frank and honest way — and a gentle and caring way — of working with them."

Landino, 76, began her career teaching junior high in Hamden, Conn. She joined Southern's faculty in 1966, teaching English composition to first-year students, a job she landed while pursuing her master's in English at Wesleyan University. She would later switch to a counseling role, and go on to earn her 6th year degree in counseling psychology from Fairfield University and a doctorate in educational psychology from the University of Connecticut in 1985.

Landino says Southern equipped her with the tools she needed for success in life, recalling a letter of recommendation she received from a Wesleyan professor while applying for that first faculty job at Southern. "He was impressed by the fact that I, as a graduate from a public institution in Connecticut, was well able to compete with Ivy League grads from all over the country," she says. "That impressed me, and it impressed Hilton Buley." [Buley was president of Southern at the time.]

"I owe Southern quite a bit," Landino adds. "This is my way of giving it back, or as the expression goes now, paying it forward." ■

