

—Slug:.....COMM-0849.bf.susan\_mcneil  
—Contributor.....  
—Contributor email.....  
—For section..... News  
—Format..... News - byline and dateline  
—Dateline..... Bellows Falls  
—Article Number:..... 42945

**Notes from editor (not for publication):**

Beautiful, Rob. I added a couple of things I found along the way. The shift from third person to first person didn't quite work — I hope adding it as an italic section at the end differentiated it a little better. In wondering about the practicalities of her role on the Village Trustees, I glanced at their meeting and wrote a small news item about their seeking people interested in serving the balance of her term. That can run as a sidebar.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Friends recall MacNeil as a tireless advocate and  
2 volunteer

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 Bellows Falls village trustee died unexpectedly, leaving  
4 multiple grieving communities and a legacy of activism for  
5 positive change

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

Community activist, writer, and Bellows Falls Village Trustee Susan MacNeil lived her last few hours exactly as she'd lived the previous 72 years.

Committed all of her life to social justice, on the evening of Jan. 8, MacNeil attended a hastily organized candlelight memorial downtown in memory of Renee Good, who had been killed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents earlier in the week in Minneapolis.

On the way to the rally, MacNeil, a lover of good food, drink, and music, stopped at the Ciao Popolo restaurant.

One of her last Facebook posts was a photo of the cocktail and this comment: "Enjoying a Winter Warlock at Ciao Popolo before the ICE rally at 6:15pm at Fireman's Park followed by the Bellows Falls Opera House show. Today we deserve to drink, to resist and to appreciate great music from four classic singers."

Following the concert, MacNeil went home, changed into her pajamas, and suffered a fatal medical incident.

Her best friend found her Saturday morning when she checked on her after not hearing from MacNeil as expected.

Word of her passing quickly spread across social media. She had lived in Bellows Falls since 2015 and made many friends there and was very active in the community.

Hundreds expressed their condolences and shock at her death.

Many wrote of MacNeil's kindness, care and willingness to help other. Her sole granddaughter, Kiyah Glenn-Ellsworth, who was extremely close to MacNeil all her life, also wants people to remember that her grandmother was "maternal, yes, but she was utterly fierce and fearless" in her support for those that she felt were marginalized or mistreated.

"The fact that one of the very last things my grandmother did was to attend an anti-ICE rally is the most Susan MacNeil thing she could have done!" Glenn-Ellsworth said.

## A lifetime of service and activism

Born in Massachusetts and raised in Connecticut, the young MacNeil was a gifted student, a voracious reader, and a talented writer. Joan Donahue, a best friend since they were both 5 years old, said that MacNeil was “very well self-educated,” and very committed to social justice from a young age.

Her prodigious energy and intellect found expression in her work with dozens of arts, community, civic, and health organizations.

In the late 1980s she moved to the Keene, New Hampshire, area. She served as PTA president at elementary schools in Franklin and Marlow, New Hampshire, later becoming an executive board member of the New Hampshire PTA. She served as vice-chair and then chair of the Operating Staff Council at Keene State College. She was director of marketing and, later, interim executive director of the Colonial Theatre in Keene.

She wrote and self-published *When Jumanji Came to Keene*, an account of the production of the 1995 feature film, which she covered as a reporter for *Entertainment Times*. An updated version of the book was re-released in 2025 to mark the 30th anniversary of the film’s release.

MacNeil has been eulogized by Falls Area Cable, where she is remembered for her “unwavering support of public access television” in both Keene and Bellows Falls.

She found a special calling in her work with the LGBTQ community and with those affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

In a public Facebook post, Hans Johnson, the former board vice-chair of the National LGBTQ Task Force, described MacNeil as “perhaps the most fervent ally of #LGBTQ+ people I have ever worked with in all 50 states & DC.”

73 She served as executive director of AIDS Services for the  
74 Monadnock Region from 2000 until 2008 and again from 2009  
75 to 2014.

76 As part of that work, she created community programs  
77 like Just Desserts, Keene Karaoke Idol, and later Southern  
78 Vermont Idol.

79 She took special pride in bringing the AIDS Memorial  
80 Quilt to local communities each year for World AIDS Day. In  
81 2025, she had the quilt displayed from the roof of the former  
82 Andrews Inn in downtown Bellows Falls. And in 2024, Bellows  
83 Falls Pride displayed the historic 14' x 25' "Section 93," a piece  
84 of the original Key West Sea-to-Sea Rainbow Flag, from the same  
85 rooftop.

86 Her granddaughter said that MacNeil "always felt  
87 strongly about" LGBTQ rights, and that she was writing about  
88 that issue as far back as the 1960s and 1970s.

89 "She wanted to help break the stigma," Glenn-Ellsworth  
90 said, noting that her grandmother's "professional life was  
91 personal for me as well."

92 "I'm also an activist," she said. "I was raised by her in  
93 that environment."

94 Joining her at rallies for former Gov. Howard Dean's  
95 2004 Democratic presidential bid and marches for women's  
96 rights, Glenn-Ellsworth said that MacNeil "made sure I knew it  
97 was important to have an opinion and to fight for people's rights,  
98 to stand up for them."

99 MacNeil often spoke of a trip to the Kingdom of Eswatini  
100 (formerly Swaziland) with her granddaughter in 2019 as one of  
101 the highlights of her life.

102 Glenn-Ellsworth said that she will "try to continue the  
103 work" that MacNeil was doing. "My Nana never looked for a  
104 thank you," Glenn-Ellsworth said. "If she saw positive change in  
105 the community, that was enough for her."

106 Last week, in honor of MacNeil, Glenn-Ellsworth had the  
107 last words her grandmother wrote to her tattooed on her  
108 shoulder. In MacNeil's handwriting.

## 109 A final chapter in Bellows Falls

110 After moving to Bellows Falls in 2015, MacNeil didn't  
111 slow down, she just found a new community to focus her energy  
112 on. She worked at Landmark College for several years.

113 A work accident in 2022, while limiting her physically,  
114 did not interfere with her community activism.

115 But that same year MacNeil experienced a life-changing  
116 tragedy.

117 She had been very close to her mother and cared for her  
118 through the end of her life.

119 As her mother was close to death in a hospital, MacNeil  
120 was trying to talk with her. Her mother, who had a hearing  
121 impairment, was supposed to be provided with an amplified  
122 telephone, which would have made a phone conversation  
123 possible.

124 But due to a mixup, the phone was not available, and  
125 MacNeil had an excruciating experience trying to have a last  
126 conversation that her mother could neither hear nor understand.

127 Out of that horrible experience, MacNeil wrote and self-  
128 published *18 Minutes: A Daughter's Primer on Life & Death*, both  
129 a tribute and memoir for her mother and a treatise on death and  
130 dying.

131 MacNeil took that experience and used it to advocate for  
132 amplified phones in hospital rooms and nursing homes. She also  
133 collaborated with Kasey March, the founder of Doula Care for  
134 Dying, to create a workshop, "Life, Death and Cake — Preparing  
135 for a Good Death." It was designed to help families gracefully  
136 and openly deal with end-of-life planning.

## ‘An invaluable force for good’

“Susan was, indeed, a wonder,” said Bellows Falls artist and activist Charlie Hunter. “She had such warm-hearted passion for the things she believed in.”

Hunter said he met her when he first came to the town. MacNeil was helping Robert McBride with publicity for his Rockingham Arts and Museum Project.

“Since then, she has been an invaluable force for good in countless community projects. Those where we have intersected often have been Rockingham for Progress (RFP) — overseeing the Miss Bellows Falls Diner project — and volunteer work with the Bellows Falls Opera House under the aegis of Rockingham Entertainment Development (RED).”

With RED, Hunter said, MacNeil helped the group write the group’s 2022 bylaws and, in 2023, she helped “develop the first membership program for the Opera House, attempting to help stem the operational losses that the Opera House incurs each year. From that, her ongoing passion for independent film led to our collaboration on BFFilms in 2024.”

That is a program through which “regional and local filmmakers can screen their work at the Opera House,” Hunter said.

“In the subsequent 18 months, she wrangled more than a dozen film screenings, ranging from emerging filmmakers such as Matt Munroe and Gavin Key to luminaries such as Charles Light, Bess O’Brien, and Jay Craven,” Hunter said.

In collaboration with Bellows Falls Pride, Hunter said, MacNeil “annually pounded the pavement procuring sponsors for Pride Month movies each June, and she was hoping to find sponsors for a Coming-Out Month Classic Film in October — in fact, we were scheduled to start meeting about her 2026 film plans this coming week!”

Hunter added that he had “been so impressed with Susan’s dedication and genuine love of movies that this year” that

171 RED asked her to choose a public domain film for a Classic Film  
172 Wednesday in her honor.

173 MacNeil chose the Spencer Tracy and Elizabeth Taylor  
174 sequel to *Father of the Bride*, the 1951 film *Father's Little*  
175 *Dividend*.

176 "Little did I imagine it would turn out to be a memorial  
177 screening," Hunter said.

178 In addition, Hunter will work with Bellows Falls Pride to  
179 endow a Susan MacNeil Film Series for the Opera House, with a  
180 goal of underwriting "two Pride movies each June, a Coming-Out  
181 Month film in October, an independent/local film screening, and  
182 an annual out-of-copyright Classic Film at the Opera House."

183 An anonymous donor has already pledged to match up  
184 to \$2,500 for the series, toward a goal of \$5,000. Those interested  
185 in donating can visit [tinyurl.com/SusanMacNeil](https://tinyurl.com/SusanMacNeil).

186 The series would operate in the same spirit as the Ray  
187 Massucco Concert Series — formed after the death of Bellows  
188 Falls lawyer and civic volunteer Ray Massucco, who died in 2022  
189 — "which provides a wonderful living memorial to the music Ray  
190 loved," Hunter said.

191 Hunter also worked with MacNeil on the RFP project of  
192 restoring the Miss Bellows Falls Diner, where he called her a "life  
193 force." MacNeil's expertise with nonprofits and grant applications  
194 was of tremendous help to the group, he said.

195 "Not only must grants be applied for," Hunter said, "if  
196 received, there is very specific paperwork that must be done in  
197 order to receive the actual money. Susan handled all that without  
198 breaking a sweat."

199 Hunter also remembered MacNeil's "delight in things."

200 "She loved fancy cocktails and grant applications,  
201 movies of all sorts, music that she randomly got introduced to,  
202 drag shows, meatloaf dinners and the Moose Lodge, all our local  
203 restaurants, people of means and people who had virtually  
204 nothing material in the world," he said. "She was a real good egg,  
205 and I miss her a ton already."

206           The final line of her obituary, found elsewhere in this  
207 issue, and which lists many more of her accomplishments than  
208 this article, sums her life up succinctly: "Susan MacNeil lived her  
209 life by showing up — with compassion, courage, kindness, and  
210 conviction.

211           "Her difference was immense, and her legacy will  
212 continue in every life she touched."

213           \* \* \*

214           Reporter Robert F. Smith adds this personal note: *Susan*  
215 *MacNeil was also my friend and close neighbor, and I heartily*  
216 *agree with Charlie Hunter's assessment of her.*

217           *We lived in side-by-side apartments for a decade, until*  
218 *she moved into the newly constructed Bellows Falls Garage*  
219 *apartment house two years ago.*

220           *We kept an eye out for each other and our fellow*  
221 *apartment dwellers. We helped install and remove air*  
222 *conditioning units when the seasons changed. We'd cook extra*  
223 *food to share, or we'd shop for someone too ill to go out. It was*  
224 *all part of the community we'd developed.*

225           *During Covid, MacNeil found plenty of time to bake —*  
226 *which she did very well — and it was not unusual to find a bag*  
227 *of her latest creation hanging on the front doorknob. Instead of*  
228 *complaints, she sent encouraging texts when I occasionally*  
229 *practiced guitar in the evenings.*

230           *She was a good neighbor.*

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

231           Visiting hours for Susan MacNeil will take place on  
232 Friday, Jan. 23, from 4 to 6 p.m. at the Fenton & Hennessey  
233 Funeral Home, 55 Westminster St., Bellows Falls, with food and  
234 drink at Ciao Popolo, 36 The Square, from 6 p.m. Her family is  
235 planning celebrations of life: one in April, and one in July for her



236 birthday. An obituary appears in the Milestones column on pages  
237 B4-B5.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

*LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:*

####BEGIN MAXISSUE####

238 0

####END MAXISSUE####

LINKS:

####BEGIN LINKS####

239

####END LINKS####

VIDEO:

####BEGIN VIDEO####

240

####END VIDEO####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

####BEGIN LOGLINE####

241

####END LOGLINE####