

# Katharine Merck, Plaid House founder & benefactor, dies at 96; leaves legacy in residential treatment

The activist who founded Plaid House and was personally involved in the running of Plaid House for many years has died at 96. Katharine Evarts Merck, whom everyone called “Kate,” died this spring at Brookhaven, an assisted living facility in Lexington, Massachusetts. She and her husband, the late philanthropist Albert W. Merck, had moved there 18 years ago from Mendham.

Kate Merck conceived of the idea of Plaid House in the early 1970s after a decade of raising money and consciousness on behalf of organizations like the NAACP, Fair Housing, and Common Cause.

According to O’Melia, Enright mentioned this to Mrs. Merck, who immediately volunteered to have the young girl be a guest for the holidays at the Merck home, where she and her husband lived with their four children. After that experience, Mrs. Merck realized there were no local temporary residences or “shelters” for adolescent girls when there were problems at home.

So she decided to start a group home, gathering support from a wide variety of friends, local organization leaders, and business people. They included Enright; Dr. Ella Cummins, a Morristown pediatrician; Mrs. Homer Meade of Morristown Neighborhood House; Harry Weaver, a noted architect and planner in Madison; and Mrs. Ruth Eames of Morris Plains, the food columnist for the *Daily Record of Morristown* and an officer of The Woman’s Club of Morristown.

A Board of Directors was formed, and a house was purchased on Western Avenue in Morristown. After renovations that allowed the residence to accommodate a handful of teenage girls, Plaid House opened in 1975.

As the first chair of the Board of Directors, Kate Merck was very much hands on. According to O’Melia, Mrs. Merck was often at Plaid House early in the morning to help the residents get off to school. She planned creative activities and field trips. She contributed input on the young women being referred to Plaid House by the state and was responsible for establishing policies and routines that have 45 years. “The girls who knew her really liked her,” said O’Melia.

Mrs. Merck also helped select staff, particularly houseparents, who lived on the third floor of Plaid House. “Not only that, but when the houseparents needed a break she’d let them live in a cottage on her grounds in Mendham,” recalled O’Melia.



**KATHARINE MERCK** (right) attends an Open House at Plaid House in the late 1990s to celebrate the redecorating of the first floor. From left are Darcy Gilson of Morristown, a former Board member, and Executive Director of Plaid House Neville Newton.

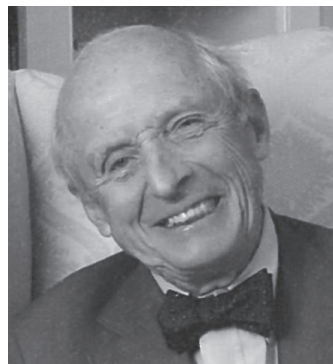
One of the original houseparents, Chris Burkhardt, who was with the Morris County Probation Department when he and his wife came to live at Plaid House, said Ms. Merck was always very accessible to staff. They always appreciated the invitation to stay in the Merck guest house.

According to Burkhardt, Mrs. Merck “took a risk in starting Plaid House as it was not necessarily welcome in the neighborhood at first.” Once the house was approved, Burkhardt said, she persuaded four different charitable groups to volunteer to decorate the residence. “Each took a room,” he reported.

Ms. Merck, he went on, was extremely knowledgeable about professional ways to help troubled teens and knew how to get agencies like Probation involved. “Kate would even leave the tennis court and immediately come to Plaid House if there was a problem,” recalled Burkhardt.

## Plaid House “was personal”

O’Melia got to know Mrs. Merck when O’Melia was working in the Morris County Probation Department and had clients at Plaid House. “She was one of the most caring people you will ever meet,” noted O’Melia. “She knew exactly what she wanted to do opening Plaid House. Plaid House was her baby. It was very personal to her.”



**Albert W. Merck**



**Katharine Merck**

Mrs. Merck remained board chair until the mid-1980s. "She stayed involved," noted O'Melia, "but did not have a hand in the day-to-day activities." Then, in 2002, when the Mercks retired and moved to Massachusetts, they set up the Katharine and Albert Merck Fund for the Support of Plaid House.

Neville Newton, executive director of Plaid House, said the fund, which is set up in perpetuity, produces income that helps to raise staff salaries, bring in programs that bolster academics, and support the residents who age out of the system. "What we have been able to achieve would have been very difficult if we didn't have that money coming in," said Newton. "We count on this, and that's truly tremendous."

The academic component of the fund is in the form of financial assistance given to residents who graduate and go on to college. Since the fund began, it has helped 37 young women attain higher education. The Mercks, Newton explained, were huge supporters of young people's educations, and they felt this financial boost was "the greatest investment they could make."

Thinking about Kate Merck's legacy, Newton thought what most impressed him was her sincerity and belief in the mission of Plaid House. "Before I came to Plaid House I had worked for other agencies," he recalled. "After the initial vision, many of those agencies became businesses and really didn't feel the mission. But when I met Mrs. Merck I saw this intense passion she had for the mission of Plaid House. You felt it at board meetings, and you felt it when she was in the house. And we've never lost it."



**AT PLAID HOUSE'S 25th anniversary party at the Park Avenue Club in 2000, Katharine Merck (center in white dress) was honored by many. From left are: Marilyn Miller-O'Melia, current president of the Plaid House Board of Directors, former Board member Stewart McClure, Mrs. Merck, Chris Burkhart, a former Board member and onetime Plaid House houseparent, Meg Healey, a former consulting psychologist to Plaid House, and former Board member Bette Simmons.**

## Play and donate replaces Luncheon-Card Party

Because of COVID-19, The Patrons of Plaid House have had to cancel the festive October Luncheon and Card Party that benefits Plaid House programs.

However, the Patrons will initiate a donation campaign with a card party theme. This fall the group is reaching out to Card Party past attendees to play bridge for Plaid House one day in lieu of attending the card party.

Marla Jackson of Chester, the co-chair of the Patrons' group with Michele Blanchard of Morristown, said the Patrons will ask players to make a suggested donation in the amount of what the ticket price would have been this year, or any amount they feel comfortable giving. "I think, given the uncertainty of the pandemic, this is the prudent thing to do," said Jackson.

According to Jackson, funds raised at this event support the art therapy program at Plaid House, one of the most popular activities. During the quarantine, this is the only outside therapeutic program that has operated for residents, so The Patrons group is anxious to find an alternate way to fund it.