

“Lillian Moller Gilbreth, A Profile in Caring”

“The silent language of her communication is present whenever you are near her, in her eyes, her movements, and in the way she relates to you.”

This description of Lillian Moller Gilbreth is just one of the many beautiful things that has been said of this great woman who contributed so much to so many. Wife, mother, lecturer, author, educator, and consulting engineer, her life is a history of courage, dedication, love, caring, and understanding.

Her son, Frank Gilbreth, Jr., says of her: “She was gentle and never so much as raised her voice at children.... Instead of trying to boss us, mother always treated us as equals.”

All her life she was a listener. “Call me if you need me” is another saying which friends and acquaintances heard throughout their relationships with her. And they did. By the hundreds – educators, government leaders, the handicapped, and those who just needed a friend, someone who would understand.

“She never gave advice,” said Jane Callaghan, her secretary and friend of many years. “I knew her since 1929, and in all that time, I never came across the person who after meeting her didn’t

come away with something for himself. If someone was going through a trying time with a problem or difficulty, she always knew the question to ask to get them on the way to a solution.

Born to William and Annie Moller on May 24, 1878, in Oakland, California, the second of 10 children, she was a shy, retiring child. So began her formal education at the age of 9. When she went into the 1st grade classroom filled with younger, staring pupils, she gritted her teeth, straightened her back, and showed the courage and undaunted spirit she would continue to show throughout her lifetime. Even though it was difficult for her to enter that formal setting, she walked into it bravely and sat at her desk, determined she would go through in the best way she knew the experience all of us as children have undergone with some degree of fear and trepidation.

Dr. Gilbreth graduated from the University of California in 1900, where she was later named Phi Beta Kappa. She was chosen by Dr. Benjamin Wheeler, the president of the University, as commencement speaker, which made her the first woman to be given this honor at the school. It marked the beginning of many firsts for Dr. Gilbreth.

She was later to be known as the First Lady of Engineering and the First Ambassador of Management. She was the first woman to be selected to the National Academy of Engineering, and the first woman to receive the Hoover medal.

When asked to deliver the commencement speech by Dr. Wheeler – who was a little leery of a woman performing this function – he cautioned her on several matters of deportment. But one of his admonitions “to be a woman” was unnecessary, although it did not fall on deaf ears, for she always listened. For one thing was clear, Dr. Gilbreth was first and foremost a woman.

When in 1904 she married Frank Bunker Gilbreth, the pioneer of time and motion study, she had no idea that not only was she to become a leader in the engineering world, but was also to become the mother of 12 children.

In a *New York Post* interview in 1941, Dr. Gilbreth said: “When my husband first told me he wanted to have six sons and six daughters, I asked how on earth anybody could have 12 children and continue in a career.” He replied: “We teach management, so we shall have to practice it.” And so they did. Their family was reared on efficiency techniques, and anyone who has read “Cheaper By The Dozen” by Frank, Jr., and Ernestine Gilbreth, know how each child participated in the efficient and practical methods of getting chores done with time to pursue intellectual interests and have fun, too.

The Gilbreths did have 12 children – in fact, six sons and six daughters. Their first child was a girl. And second, third, and fourth daughter came in swift succession before a son was born. They lost one child, Mary, who died of diphtheria in 1912.

Thus far, Lillian had received two degrees – a bachelor's and a master's in literature. At the time she met Frank, she already had plans to work toward her Ph.D. Frank was not the least bit dismayed by this goal, but went about helping her.

Her thesis on "The Psychology of Management" was submitted to her alma mater, the University of California, but she was told that a Ph.D. could not be awarded without a year spent in residence as a doctoral candidate. Since she was busily engaged in raising a family at this time, a year's residence at University was not possible. But Frank went about getting the thesis published. A number of publishers told him they could not possibly put out a book on such a subject by a woman.

But the Society of Industrial Engineers accepted it, and between 1912 and 1913 published it in installments in their magazine. But it wasn't until 1914 that a book publisher in the newly opened house of Sturgis and Walton was willing to accept it.

Mr. Walton said he would publish it, but he warned, there could be no word about the fact that it was written by a woman. So, *Psychology of Management* came out as a book under the name of L. M. Gilbreth. The story goes that when Frank was asked if he was related to L. M.

Gilbreth, he replied: "Only by marriage."

As soon as that was accomplished Frank set out to help her get her doctoral degree. And it seems providential that at this time he was given a contract to install scientific management at a plant of a New England company, located near Brown University. Dr. Faunce, who was then president of Brown, was interested in psychology and its application to management, so it was here in 1915 that Lillian became a Ph.D. And a few days later another daughter was born.

With the entry of the United States into the First World War, Frank was commissioned a major in the Engineer Officers Reserve Corps. He then began applying his techniques of time and motion study in hospitals for the rehabilitation of men returning from the war desperately in need of help – especially those crippled and disabled. Lillian helped him in this, too. She analyzed the photos taken and offered suggestions and criticism. His regard for her professionalism is best expressed in his own words: “I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your genius.”

In 1921, when she was made an honorary member of the Society of Industrial Engineers, it was the first time anyone ever saw Frank speechless – so overwhelmed and pleased was he at the honor accorded his wife. She, on the other hand, felt it was because of his work that she was receiving the honor. Her work in psychology and emphasis on it as a management tool were being recognized in the engineering field by the profession’s top men – when engineering, essentially a man’s field, viewed women in the profession with a great deal of misgiving.

In 1924, when the Gilbreths were planning a trip to attend conferences in London and Czechoslovakia, Frank Gilbreth died suddenly. He had been scheduled to speak at the World Power Conference in London and preside at a session of the First Congress of Scientific Management in Prague. These invitations were strong indications that their work in motion study had gained recognition not only in this country, but in foreign countries as well, so Dr. Gilbreth was invited to substitute for him.

A family conference was held and three days after his death, with the encouragement of her children, she sailed for Europe. Leaving her family was the most difficult thing at this time, but she realized if she were to carry on in her husband's place and keep her family together, it was vital to go on with his plans.

She would be meeting engineers from all over the world, and if she succeeded in carrying on for Frank now, she would have more of a chance to show his clients that she would be able to continue his work. And she knew he wanted it so she, who had always depended on her husband to make the decisions, now found it necessary to do so alone.

In "Belles on Their Toes," another book by Frank, Jr. and Ernestine, they say: "There was a time when mother wept easily, when she was afraid of walking alone at night, and a lightning storm would send her shuddering into a closet. But all that ended the day dad died. It ended because it had to end. It ended because of the realization that what she really feared had happened, and

tears would not wash out a word of it. She gave his speech in London, and presided for him in Prague. And she was not afraid anymore.”

While in Europe, she wrote to her children and told them of her plans to open a motion-study school in the family home in Montclair, New Jersey. When she got back to the States, she began to get students through companies interested in time and motion study. It took some time, but after awhile she had eight pupils. She carried on classes in her home where she and Frank had set up a laboratory. It was very successful, and she continued it for a number of years until schools and universities began accepting motion study and scientific management as part of their curricula. Many young people were started on their careers with Dr. Gilbreth as their professor in her home laboratory in Montclair.

With the help of her students, she designed a kitchen – the type known today as the efficiency kitchen. She drew up blueprints of the layout and equipment to be used, and presented it to an electric company and was assigned a contract.

Because of her interest in the handicapped, she designed kitchens that allowed people confined to wheelchairs, or who had heart disease and other disabilities, to function remarkably well – well enough to manage their own homes. She said that of all her work, that with the handicapped was the most rewarding. Today, many of the time-saving techniques and equipment and methods of homemaking that women enjoy are due in large part to her efforts. In

recognition of her contributions and work with the handicapped, the American Management Association made her an honorary member.

Clearly, she believed in the dignity of man. Her life give testimony to this. She never took away the individual's responsibility for himself or his own actions, nor did she presume to know more about his problems than he himself, but she always cared. She inspired confidence in others. Her every action, whether it be towards her family, friends, heads of state, co-workers, engineers, colleagues, was always uplifting. She truly believed in human beings. She had faith in them. She was optimistic about them. She always encouraged, never discouraged.

At a time when the Civil Rights Movement was not even begun, Lillian Gilbreth was striving for the comfort, well-being, and rights of others. She was always against any form of discrimination, whether it be of race, sex, creed, or age. When doors were closed to her, she didn't go out beating them down, but she went about doing her work, and slowly, but surely, those doors opened to her. They not only opened, the welcomed her.

She was one of the first to advocate day-care centers for children so that mothers who had to work, or chose to work, could do so without the worry that their children were not receiving proper care. And when, in 1910, psychology was just becoming recognized as a science through the efforts of Dr. Freud and his followers, Dr. Gilbreth had been espousing for a number of years the application of the principles of psychology in industry and in every aspect of life.

Even toward the latter part of the 19th century, she anticipated the many changes that were to take place in the 20th century – the growth of the world’s population, the emergence of new nations, the rapid technological advances that were to set the world in sometimes deadly competitions. And throughout it all, she kept on calling attention to the needs of the human being.

From 1930 until the end of World War II she served on committees dealing with unemployment, civil defense, war production, rehabilitation of the handicapped, and problems of the aged and aging. She also served on the faculties of Purdue and Rutgers universities, Newark College of Engineering, and Bryn Mawr.

During the war, she was a member of such committees as the Committee of Educational Advisors of the Office of War Information, and on education for the War Manpower Commission.

In between, she lectured technical and professional meetings, women’s clubs, PTA meetings, and she attended conferences. But she also participated fully in her children’s lives. As she so aptly put it, “I like to save my time and spend my energy.” And she did – enthusiastically, unstintingly, never complaining of too much to do or too little time in which to do it.

At an age when most people have already retired, Lillian Gilbreth embarked on projects and lecture tours all over the world. She wrote books and articles, prepared addresses and papers for presentation at technical organizations, and as a member of educational teams, sponsored by the United States government, was sent to Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan. She lectured before technical organizations, civic groups, service clubs, rehabilitation teams, and colleges and universities in Australia, India, and South Africa.

And as a representative to the Council for International Progress in Management, she attended meetings in Athens, Paris, Mexico City, and Rotterdam.

In 1961, the American Institute of Industrial Engineers established the Frank and Lillian Gilbreth Industrial Engineering Award, its highest honor. Frank B, posthumously, and Dr. Lillian M. Gilbreth were the first recipients.

In reviewing her life, it is apparent that Lillian Gilbreth's accomplishments were extraordinary ones. Her achievements and successes were due in large part to her motivation – she cared. She cared about the comfort and needs of her fellow man, and she dedicated herself to fulfilling those needs.

From an address she made before a conference in Lake Placid in 1961, this sums up her philosophy more perfectly than anything more I can say. She said, "...we have to learn all the time, we have to teach all the time, and there are so many things we have to teach. We have to

teach that life is interesting, we have to teach that life is worthwhile, and we have to teach that life can be beautiful. We want educated heads in the very best way we know of educating, and we wanted educated hands. Above all, of course, we want educated hearts. We need people who care. And provided we emphasize the human element, I think that will give us peace so that we can as a world, using the tools that have been given to us, go into the future unafraid.”