



Ethel Clare Elikan - *Public Service*

Shy in many ways, Ethel Clare Elikan never shrank from an opportunity to work for her special friends: the visually handicapped of the Ohio Valley.

The longtime executive director of the Seeing Hand Association Inc. of Wheeling was born in Wheeling on Nov. 11, 1911, the daughter of Moses and Clara Heither Elikan. She was a graduate of Triadelphia High School and received her teaching certificate from the University of Pennsylvania.

After teaching kindergarten for several years, Elikan served with the American Red Cross during World War II. Returning home, she became a caseworker for the local Red Cross chapter in Wheeling. Later, she became associated with the Florence Crittenton Home and taught braille to the blind.

Elikan was a volunteer caseworker in the early years of the Seeing Hand Association, then known as the Ohio County Association for the Blind, which was founded in 1935 by Mrs. Henry Russell. The agency's activities were first held at the YMCA and later at the American Legion post on Chapline Street.

The Seeing Hand Association was chartered by the state of West Virginia on Dec. 21, 1948. In 1949, the association moved to 737 Market St. and Elikan was appointed by the board as its full-time executive director. Over the next 50 years, she was a tireless worker for the visually handicapped of the Upper Ohio Valley.

Elikan organized classes for cooking, sewing and typing and taught braille at the homes of the blind, at the center and even at the state penitentiary. In 1951, she opened the Seeing Hand Workshop, which is still actively operating today, providing employment, income and therapy to the blind. Elikan, in effect, became a local employment agency for the blind, finding jobs for many blind persons throughout the state as well as at her center and also assisting the blind in obtaining employment at vending stands. An active board member of the State Department of Vocational Rehabilitation and its social services program, she maintained a close contact with the Romney School for the Blind and Deaf and was responsible for many

local handicapped children being sent to that institution for training and education.

Elikan organized numerous activities for the blind: the Cheerful Blind Bowlers teams, which still bowl weekly and have participated in national blind bowling tournaments, winning first place at least four times; a nationally-recognized summer vacation camp for the blind of all income levels; outings for local visually-handicapped persons to baseball games, the symphony, Broadway shows and various bus trips; and much-praised Christmas parties for blind adults and Easter egg hunts for children with sight problems. Her efforts helped many local residents obtain guide dogs from the Seeing Eye Guide Dogs organization in Morristown, N.J.

The Seeing Hand Association was one of the early Community Chest agencies in Wheeling but with a significant reduction in funding by the United Way, it was necessary for Elikan to work overtime to secure funds to maintain the activities of the Seeing Hand Association and its workshop for the blind.

Elikan semi-retired as executive director at age 86 in 1997. She died Feb. 2, 1998.

The board of directors of the Seeing Hand Association recently purchased a building, formerly occupied by the Unemployment Compensation Commission, for its operation and workshop in North Wheeling. This new building has been named the Elikan Center.

More recently, a friend who respected and was inspired by the work accomplished by Elikan on behalf of the blind, left \$1 million in trust to the Seeing Hand Association. The income from this trust goes to the organization for its general purposes, which means the agency will be able to meet its annual expenses and continue the programs instituted for the blind by Elikan. These funds were obtained without formal solicitations and in recognition of Elikan's labors on behalf of the visually handicapped, according to Seeing Hand board members, who note that Elikan indirectly has now provided for the future of the Seeing Hand organization to which she dedicated so much of her life.