

# Rutland Herald

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Article published May 11, 2010

## Poverty fighter dies in car crash

By [Kevin O'Connor](#) STAFF WRITER

When Edna Fairbanks-Williams found herself abandoned with five young children almost 50 years ago, she accepted a friend's loan to buy an old Ford, then made the money back driving around scrubbing other people's cottages and sewing other people's clothes.

"My friend said, 'Give it to someone else that could use it,'" she recalled after trying to repay the favor. "I did, and I've been doing it ever since."

The 77-year-old great-grandmother of 16 spent her most recent days making dawn-to-dusk deliveries of free food and hand-me-down clothes to needy neighbors when she wasn't motoring to the state capital to fight proposed government human service cuts. She was behind the wheel just miles from her Hubbardton trailer early Monday afternoon when she traveled past a stop sign, hit a truck and died.

Colleagues say Vermont just lost its most ardent advocate for its most vulnerable.

"There are few who will surpass Edna's constant vigil — fighting the good fight for the poor, the elderly, those living with disabilities and low-income working Vermonters," said Karen Lafayette, legislative advocate for the Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council. "I don't quite know what we'll do without her."

Fairbanks-Williams helped launch the council — born of President Lyndon Johnson's 1960s War on Poverty — in 1972 and, despite being of retirement age and surviving only on Social Security, continued to serve as its president during the Legislature's current debate over budget cuts.

"The state doesn't understand the repercussions," she told this newspaper in March. "They say look to the community and relatives, but if they're starving, how can they take care of someone else?"

Fairbanks-Williams also was a longtime board member for Vermont Legal Aid, the Legal Services Law Line of Vermont, the nonprofit Vermont Dental Care Programs for low-income children, the Vermont Tobacco Evaluation and Review Board, a government group seeking to stop people from smoking, and the national Legal Services Corporation, which oversees all government-funded legal-service programs for low-income people.

"I haven't ever seen things so bad, except years and years ago when I first went on welfare and you had to wait six months," she said in March. "That was a long six months. Of course, I was young then and could survive."

The former Edna Thresher, born in Randolph and raised in Rochester, was fathered by a Depression-era mechanic who wanted a son. He taught her how to ride and repair a tractor before she married at age 15, dropped out of school and gave birth to two sons and three daughters, at which time her husband left her.

"My daughter once was hit by a car so hard she'd gone up into the air, come down through the windshield, got thrown back off and skidded on her head along the blacktop," she recalled in 2005. "I said, 'I'd sell my soul for enough money to fix her.' And this man's voice behind me said, 'I'll take it.'"

The man was a minister. Pulling out his wallet, he answered her prayer.

"I've had that happen to me several times," she said. "I was in desperate circumstances and somebody helped and said, 'Pass it on.'"

Fairbanks-Williams earned her general equivalency diploma as a working mother in her late 30s and traded her sewing needle and scrub brush for a job at the Bennington-Rutland Opportunity Council, an anti-poverty agency, only to learn she had throat cancer. She had to stop working to have surgery. Fortunately, she met a man named Douglas Williams, "a good guy with a good job in a factory," who she wed after her operation.

Fairbanks-Williams went on to lose both breasts to cancer in 1985 and her uterus to a hysterectomy in 2002 and had surgery to remove a cancerous growth from her lungs in 2005. Her second husband died of heart disease at age 69, her older son died of cardiac arrest at age 48 and her youngest daughter died of cancer at age 43.

The widow's Hubbardton trailer was her safe haven, guarded over the years by a yard of junked cars, tires, firewood and gas tanks. In 1992, a state superior court judge, bowing to local complaints, ordered her to clean up the lawn. She stuffed her 12-foot-by-70-foot home floor to ceiling with her outdoor stockpiles yet still found room to host countless people without a place of their own.

One spring Sunday in 2002, Fairbanks-Williams had invited a homeless man to sleep on her couch. He was a smoker. She returned to find more than 40 firefighters from six towns battling a blaze that consumed everything.

"There is absolutely no one who has done more for low-income folks in Vermont than Edna, so we need to rally around her," longtime Vermont low-income legal advocate John Shullenberger wrote his peers, who went on to find her another trailer.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton named Fairbanks-Williams to the 11-member Board of Directors of the national Legal Services Corporation, which paid her expenses so she could travel to Washington, D.C., (she met Clinton in the Oval Office and the first lady at a private White House breakfast) and other national landmarks coast to coast.

But the woman who stoked an outdoor stove to heat dishwashing water didn't change. She pulled a Mountain Dew from her dress during one high-level gathering shortly after her double mastectomy.

"Nobody knew I didn't have the breasts," she later recalled, "but I wore my bra, so I had a carrying place."

For all that she lacked, her laugh was rich.

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