

Elizabeth Beckwith Nilsen '31

Elizabeth Beckwith Nilsen was born in 1914 in Toledo, Ohio, where her father, Laurance Beckwith, was a prominent stockbroker. Mr. Beckwith's shrewd investments, particularly in American Home Products, the start-up company that became Wyeth Pharmaceuticals, provided the basis of his daughter's generosity toward Chatham Hall.

Elizabeth arrived at Chatham Hall in the second half of her junior year and graduated in 1931. Her application listed her interest in music and art; she was also an avid equestrian. While the variety of activities and opportunities that the School offered were exciting for her, it was the Chatham Hall community that was transformational: the life-long friends she made, the way in which people treated each other with respect and friendship, and the high idealism and honor of the School. These characteristics stayed with her for a lifetime and kept Chatham Hall alive to her, a fact to which her family attests. Her statement about Chatham Hall was simple and forthright -- that the School affected her deeply at an important point in her life, and for that she felt immensely grateful.

Elizabeth Beckwith married R.A. Nilsen in 1940, her second marriage. Mr. Nilsen was an executive in the foam rubber industry, and their only child was a son from Mrs. Nilsen's first marriage.

The Nilsens retired to Florida. Mrs. Nilsen was very proud of her family, particularly her numerous grandchildren. She was stylish: her wardrobe was extensive and varied, particularly her shoes. She loved opera – she was a regular listener to the Saturday afternoon broadcasts of The Metropolitan Opera—and enjoyed oil painting, needlepoint, Bridge, fishing in Florida (particularly for tarpon, bonefish, and marlin in tournaments with her husband), and ranch life in Wyoming on summer vacations. Family members recollect her advice to them as consistently practical and forward-looking: "Always try to do your best," "Live each day to the best of your ability, for you'll never have it back again," "Accept people on the basis of their character, not on the basis of their occupations or financial resources," and "Never hesitate to try something new. Don't let fear of failing keep you from trying it."

Mrs. Nilsen also prided herself on her independence until the time of her illness, later in her life, noting that she cooked and cleaned her home herself. Mrs. Nilsen died in October 2006, at the age of 92. Her husband died in March 2009, at the age of 97.