

# **“Celebration for Education” to honor MHS Alumni Anne Coghlan and Gary Kelly**

March 11, 2011

*By Catherine Walsh (MHS '80)*

One is a senior stateswoman of Milton who organized her 60<sup>th</sup> Milton High School reunion a few years ago. The other is a guy in his prime who graduated from Milton High over 30 years ago and works behind the scenes to improve diverse aspects of town life.

What Milton High School alumni Anne E. Coghlan '44 and Gary Kelly '78 have in common is a passion for the town, the Milton Public Schools and the Milton Foundation for Education (MFE), the independent nonprofit that raises funds for key school enrichment projects. For their dedication to improving Milton and its public schools, Coghlan and Kelly will be honored at MFE's 12<sup>th</sup> Annual “Celebration for Education – The Big Backyard Bash” gala on April 2.

An event that has raised more than \$2 million since 2000, Celebration for Education is Milton's biggest fundraiser. It has gone from being a fall event to one that ushers in spring and makes possible a range of exciting initiatives at Milton's six public schools. Projects to be funded with proceeds from MFE's 2011 gala include various outdoor classroom initiatives, a before and after school program, and videoproduction technology for the high school. Honorees Coghlan and Kelly will be among hundreds of revelers on April 2 who passionately support public education.

Born in 1927, Coghlan tested out of kindergarten and spent grades one through six at the now-defunct Belcher School in East Milton where she lived. She was the precocious only child of a former teacher and a Milton police officer, and excelled at a newly opened Mary A.Cunningham Junior High School and at Milton High School. Her experience of high school was deeply affected by World War II, she says. “All students were taken to the Auditorium to hear President Franklin Roosevelt declare war,” recalls Coghlan, who was then a sophomore.

While a number of her male classmates left Milton High during their senior year to join the Armed Forces, Coghlan was immersed in the war in a different way. She was one of four students chosen at the beginning of the year to speak at Commencement about the struggles of an oppressed population – in her case, Japanese-Americans held in internment camps by the U.S. government during the war. “I did a self-tutorial all year that involved a lot of reading and trips to the Museum of Fine Arts to learn about Japanese people and their culture,” Coghlan says. “I discovered that Japanese Americans were not well

treated in the United States at that time, which was very sad.” (Coghlan’s co-Commencement student speakers reflected on challenges facing African-Americans, Jews and Mexicans.)

Coghlan enrolled at Simmons College after graduation because her mother – “a real character!” – told her as a child that Simmons was where she would go. “My mother liked the philosophy of Mr. John Simmons, the college’s founder, of educating women to compete successfully in a variety of professions.” Coghlan loved Simmons, noting, “I received a very, very good education there and felt I had been very well prepared by Milton High School for college.”

Following in her mother’s path as an educator, Coghlan spent the first decade of her career teaching at Colby Junior College (now Colby-Sawyer College) in New Hampshire. She had already earned two masters’ degrees and begun study for a Ph.D. in microbiology when Sputnik was launched by the Russians. Suddenly the United States had a great need for teachers with advanced degrees in the sciences. Coghlan left Colby Junior College in 1959 to accept a fellowship from the National Science Foundation to work full-time on her Ph.D.

Much to her delight, Coghlan found her next job at her alma mater. She made her way up the ranks to tenured professor and then Dean of Sciences at Simmons – and stayed for 35 years. When she retired in 1993, Simmons established the Anne Coghlan Fund for Student Research. In 1998, at the time of her 50<sup>th</sup> Reunion at Simmons, Coghlan received an honorary Doctor of Science degree from the college. And a year later Simmons marked its centennial by naming Coghlan as one of “ten outstanding educators of the century.”

Her work in academia gave her the organizational skills and savvy to give back to the town of Milton and its school system, Coghlan says. In addition to such activities as serving as the Warrant Committee’s first female chair and as a board member of institutions ranging from Milton Hospital to the Cunningham Foundation and Park, she chaired the town’s high school science study and building committee from 1987 to 1996. The science wing there was named for Coghlan, though it no longer exists since the construction of the new High School and relocation of the Middle School to the original High School location.

Coghlan also became involved with the Milton Foundation for Education at a critical time. MFE was still a start-up when she took over as its second president in 1997.

“I immediately realized that MFE’s mission of doing things for the schools above and beyond what the town could do was critical to ensuring that our students would be as competitive as possible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” she says.

MFE initially focused its funds on faculty development – the foundation has since supported many other activities – and Coghlan oversaw the first two rounds of applications by teachers for grants. She obtained input from students and MFE

committee members on the merits of applications and made sure that application requirements were carefully followed. “If a faculty member didn’t get funding from MFE, I made sure that he or she knew why so they reapply the next year with a better chance of success,” Coghlan says.

Smiling, she continues: “I want people in Milton to know that *great* things have been done with money raised by the Milton Foundation for Education!” For instance, students at the high school recently extracted their own DNA to analyze in what Coghlan calls a “first-class scientific project.” In 2006, money raised from the Celebration event paid for a state-of-the-art biotechnology lab at Milton High.

When asked about changes that have taken place in MFE since its founding 15 years ago by a group of local business and educational leaders, Coghlan notes that many parents with children in the schools have become involved. “Great things are being done by the Foundation in conjunction with the schools these days, thanks to the efforts of so many committed Milton residents,” she says.

Gary Kelly is one of those Milton parents who dedicate themselves to MFE and the schools. “My experience at Milton High as a member of the Class of 1978 could not have been better due to the teachers and friends I had there,” he says. “I have an obligation to give back.”

The son of a musically gifted father who produced minstrel shows for local Catholic parishes while holding down jobs at places like Boston Edison and the Boston Herald-American, Kelly was moved early on by his dad’s community involvement. “My Dad was always looking to see how he could help others and I have tried to live my life the same way,” he says. His father died several years ago and Kelly muses that he is still feeling the void.

Kelly met his wife Jean at Milton High. Jean was a cheerleader. He was on the football team – “I wasn’t very good,” he says with a rueful laugh – “but I was a late bloomer, and played in College. The couple is raising three daughters in Milton. His eldest daughter Brianna just graduated in 2010 and is now a Milton High alumna like her parents.

A financial professional with his own wealth management and strategic advisory firm, Kelly first became involved in the town because of his love of sports. He coached American Legion baseball and Milton hockey beginning in his 20s, and once led a hockey team to an undefeated season. He is currently president of the Milton Girls Softball Association and a board member of the Milton High School Athletic Hall of Fame, which he helped found three years ago. “It’s a thrill to induct individuals and teams from eras ranging from the 1940s right up to those who are at least five years out of Milton High,” Kelly says. This year he is also serving as Vice President of the Milton High School Boosters, an organization that raises funds for high school athletics. Pointing out that anyone who gives \$25 is a Booster, Kelly adds, “There’s been a tremendous spirit of enthusiasm and support in the Boosters for the last 20 years; now

we're trying to build a stronger infrastructure and do strategic planning. "Anyone can come to the meetings or volunteer, which allows your vote to count"

Getting involved with MFE a decade ago was a natural thing for him to do, continues Kelly. "I remember being excited to be part of an relatively new organization and have an impact on the schools I went to. It was exciting to be involved with the great people that were helping and meeting people like Milton School Superintendent Mary Gormley." He served as a co-chair of the 2003 "Celebration for Education" gala.

Beginning in 2005 and 2006, he helped restart the Milton High School Alumni Association that was created in the late 1990s. Building a database has been a slow process, says Kelly, requiring a lot of detective work on the part of volunteers. But thanks to a link on the homepage of the Milton Public schools (<http://cfweb.smartedu.net/milton/alumni/>) and on Facebook (Milton High Alumni Association), the Alumni Association is slowly but surely becoming a true resource for graduates. "We now feel ready to take it to the next level as we allow alumni to register through the website." He welcomes volunteers to expand the board and can be reached at [miltonhighalumni@gmail.com](mailto:miltonhighalumni@gmail.com).

Both Anne Coghlan and Gary Kelly are a bit abashed to be MFE's first alumni honorees, as neither is by nature comfortable in the spotlight. They understand, however, that people are drawn to leaders, as Coghlan was to her mother's example and Kelly was to that of his father. So both will accept the accolades and blush their way through toasts and well wishes at the Celebration for Education gala. And then this dynamic duo will get back to business post-party, helping MFE in ways large and small – and thinking about who to nominate as the honorees for next year.

For tickets to Celebration and more information about the MFE, go to the website at [MiltonFoundationforEducation.org](http://MiltonFoundationforEducation.org).

\*\*\*\*\*