

Jo Ellen Thomas

By Shirley Elder

Jody Thomas wasn't yet 16 when she learned to drive heavy equipment around the family farm in her native Dublin, Ohio. Her father was a farmer, her mother a teacher. Her two brothers are farmers. She's a doctor. She knew from the time she was a little girl in a one-doctor town that's what she wanted to be, a doctor.

But it was the farm that shaped her life and led – eventually – to her role as a founder of the Women's Fund in her adopted state of New Hampshire.

Here's how it happened:

When the outer beltway of Columbus, Ohio, cut through the Thomas farmland, the tiny town of Dublin (pop 500 in Thomas's youth) slowly became a suburb. The old farmstead soon was more valuable for commercial use than for corn and soybeans. So Jody Thomas and her brothers sold a portion of the farmland in the late 1990s and, with her newfound profits, Thomas vowed to help others.

Along came the Women's Fund of New Hampshire.

"It just happened at the right time," she said as we sat in the comfortable home she shares with Cassandra Donovan on the edge of Great Bay in Greenland. Outside the wind whistled furiously in a late winter display of power. Inside, she chatted easily about her dedication to helping women and children.

"I've always been for equality for women and for empowering them to make their own decisions," she said. "I saw the Women's Fund as a chance to give something back to help women and kids."

The Women's Fund was a modest operation, "sort of grass roots," she said. "I admire that ... It's going to grow, which is good." She said she especially likes to see WFNH grants go to women seeking entrepreneurial skills and girls learning fundamental household and money management skills.

Jody Thomas is more formally known as Dr. Jo Ellen Thomas, a senior member of the Exeter Hospital staff and a member of Core Physician Services in Exeter, a large multi-specialty group practice that absorbed a smaller group she was with for many years.

At 66 and with nearly 40 years in Exeter, she's now treating the children and grandchildren of her first patients, and as those patients grow older, she's becoming an expert in geriatrics. She really enjoys medicine. "It's fun to be part of people growing up and growing older," she said. "It's fun to help people I've seen through hard times, good times, grief – all that."

Dr. Thomas knows what it's like to be a woman pioneer although she said she doesn't feel a bit heroic about it. But when she went to med school at Ohio State University in the 1960s, she was one of only eight women in a class of 150. In Exeter, she was the only women doctor in town for a while.

She is now more New Hampshire than Ohio. From the days of her internship in Portland, Maine, she said she has been "hooked on New England". She likes to ski, hike, bike, take photos. One framed panorama in her living room is of the White Mountains where she has hiked for years – not "peak-bagging" she emphasized, but looking for nice views. A canoe below her deck is ready for warm-weather excursions on Great Bay.

Her home – converted from an old summer cottage – has become a sanctuary. To come here after a stressful day's work, she said, is like being on vacation.