Often we feel that as one individual we cannot make a difference in protecting our environment. In recent months The Garden Club of America and two communities lost influential conservation warriors. With the deaths of Barbara Tracy Sandford (Plainfield G.C. - Zone IV) and Katherine Truman Smith Coley (Middletown G.C. - Zone II), we are reminded that one person by their individual actions truly can make a difference.

Sometimes we are thwarted by thoughts of: "What can I do?", "Who will listen?", "What difference can I make?" These women taught those of us privileged to know them, that one person can through diligence, perseverance, and steadfastness, bring others to the point where they listen, consider, and perhaps change their minds - and do the right thing.

Barbara Sandford who died this fall at age 94, was a mentor for many, never tired of teaching others about the importance of maintaining public spaces and preserving the natural landscape. Barbara was a member of the Plainfield Garden Club for 63 years, the longest tenure of anyone in the club's history. A conservation award given to worthy garden club members was established in her name many years ago. Barbara was also a founding member of her community's beautification committee.

Barbara's activism went national when she helped launch Scenic America, a nonprofit dedicated to fighting telecommunication towers and billboards, which she often described as "litter on a stick." She presided over the group's New Jersey chapter in the 1990s and campaigned against the proliferation of billboards on Garden State highways.

She also fought against urban sprawl. She was quoted in 1999 as saying, "Inappropriate and unplanned development is happening all over New Jersey, eating up our rural areas at a mind-boggling pace." Barbara was happy to teach others, including fellow garden club members, how to influence the system and make their voices heard. But she was equally comfortable in taking her stand alone and trying to make her community and world a better place. Pick up a local paper and often you found a Letter to the Editor from Barbara.

Barbara Sandford
We lost Katherine (Katchen) Coley in late summer. She had been a member of the Middletown Garden Club for 58 years. Like Barbara, she often chaired her club's Conservation Committee and probably attended the annual GCA NAL meeting in Washington, D.C. more times than any other garden club member in the nation, twenty-plus years. She could be seen as recently as 2011 storming the halls of the Senate and House buildings holding her representatives accountable for protecting the environment she held dear. She taught club members to write postcards to their state and federal legislators and to bombard their offices with phone calls, as well as calling the White House switchboard.

Katchen died at 89. In her seventies, she participated in two Partners for Plants strenuous field trips with the US Forest Service to look for a particular endangered plant in the mountains of Vermont and New Hampshire. She was determined to find a few remaining plants.

With notes and data always at her side, Katchen was prepared to answer any listener’s concerns about clean water, clean air, land use, deforestation, green building, open spaces, and on and on. She was the first in her club to buy a hybrid automobile. She was the first to reject the use of plastic bags, encourage buying local produce, and avoid paper that was not made of recycled materials.

Besides her involvement with her garden club, Katchen founded or supported many local groups that exist to this day - all to improve her community and its citizens. She served on her local Conservation Commission and the Connecticut Land Conservation Council. Few garden club members have made such fundamental and sweeping contributions or touched as many lives as has Katchen. Shortly before her death, her community of Middletown, Connecticut dedicated the Katchen Coley Mountain Laurel Preserve, a 50-acre open space of natural land that will not be developed. She was able to attend the dedication ceremony. As a Councilman said publicly at the event, "You are the epitome of what one person can do."

So, the next time you are discouraged and think you cannot make a difference against the tide of development, disregard for open spaces, or resistance to living a greener life, think of Barbara and Katchen and challenge yourself to be brave and be that voice in your community that makes a difference.