The inexhaustible spirit of Dr. Janet Fritz has had an enduring effect on Colorado State University. From establishing the child life program to fighting for equal pay, she has worked tirelessly for improvement.

Born on June 12th, 1942, Fritz grew up in Boulder, CO. After her father passed away when she was 13, the close community helped support her family. Her mother, a teacher herself, was encouraging of her education. She remembers her mother fostering the ideas, “You can do anything you want. You can go anywhere. You want to go far.” This inspiration took her on a scholarship to CU – Boulder for her undergraduate degree in psychology.

Fritz had everything planned out when she went to CU. “I was dead sure I was going to be a social worker,” she says with a laugh, but “the first couple of social classes were in sociology and I hated them. I realized I’d be a dreadful social worker.” At first, she felt stuck in the field, until a faculty member pulled strings and brought her over to psychology, where she burst with passion.

After graduating from CU, she went to Cornell for her master’s degree and ended up in the child development program. Her dissertation on the reversal of discrimination perception in children led her to clinical work at Johns Hopkins on a research project dealing with neural brain dysfunction in kids. “I swore I wouldn’t be caught dead teaching,” she laughs. However, after a few more research projects ended and before she could get another job, she was back in Colorado visiting a friend who worked at CSU, which was desperate for new psychology faculty. Her friend convinced the Dean she could teach, even though she didn’t have a doctorate yet, and she was offered a temporary teaching position. The friend knew Fritz didn’t necessarily want the job, “but I wanted any job at that point. And then she just chortled because from the first moment I loved teaching.”

She taught for a few years before taking a sabbatical to pursue her PhD at Cornell, researching early language acquisition. While CSU supported her, they “didn’t think I’d come back after I got my doctorate because it was a small department,” she explains. “But it’s the only development psychology department in Colorado and it was a terrifically wonderful collegiate atmosphere.” So she returned to CSU after finishing her doctorate and worked with her colleagues to “reshape that department and change it entirely,” but she affected the entire university. She was a major force in empowering faculty to take control of their departments, caucusing for women faculty, establishing women’s studies, and pushing for salary equality. She realized “too many women on campus were the only women in their whole department,” and she worked to rectify that and provide support to women faculty members.

Even though Fritz worked through committees to make these changes, she never fully joined the ranks of administration. She served briefly as the interim associate dean of psychology, but “that job taught me the only two things I enjoyed were my classes and my own work.” Her work included developing the child life program, “a certification program for individuals who work with children who are hospitalized and their families” that enables those individuals to provide psychosocial, emotional care and support. It’s still one of the top programs in the country. She published a large number of articles and co-authored one book. She also traveled extensively, to India, Poland, Russia, Israel, and Kenya, in each country studying some aspect of childhood socialization. In Kenya, she worked with HIV caregivers, mainly children. “I could have started a little earlier knowing that you can have a large effect on
the larger universe,” she admits, but what she accomplished in spite of a few aimless years is more than some people do in a lifetime.