



## Sylvia West Van Bergen O'Connor

September 9, 1934 - July 28, 2020

Until July 28, 2020 Sylvia West Cannon Van Bergen O'Connor was the grande dame and matriarch of our family, something that we think surprised her a bit over the past few years, as she reflected back on a life where she was most frequently under the shadow of others.

When little Sylvia was born on Sept. 9, 1934 in Chicago, Illinois, she joined a family well-known in society and politics. Her famous, revered grandfather Roy O. West was a leader in the Republican Party and had recently stepped down from his position as Secretary of the Interior. He continued to be a mover and shaker in Illinois politics throughout her entire childhood and her mother Helen West Cannon was a young, striking and quite busy socialite. Sylvia and older sister Louise were raised by German and Irish nursemaids before they were sent away to boarding school. Her father, LeGrand Cannon, was a quiet and unassuming utilities executive who died when Sylvia was in her early 30s and before some of us were born. He is whom she spoke of most frequently in these twilight days.

Like her grandfather, parents and sister before her, Sylvia Cannon went off to DePauw University in the early 1950s where the library is named for her grandfather and both he and her mother served on the Board of Trustees. She joined Kappa Alpha Theta sorority and was active as an alum for the rest of her years. She left school early to marry in 1956 and raised three little Van

Bergen girls, who were frequently dressed for church in matching outfits, hats and gloves. She lived in a small town with her well-liked physician-husband and did her part leading girl scout troops, PTAs and started the local Episcopal church.

Until her mother's death in 1988, holidays and Sundays were dictated by the requirements that she call her mother at 1pm every Sunday after church and write her mother a letter weekly. While she was on the verge of becoming our grande dame, she remained a dutiful daughter. She lost her sister in 1981 and remained in contact with her beloved nephews and niece David, Alan and Beth the rest of her life.

When Sylvia moved to Springfield, Il, she continued with her volunteer work until her daughters were grown and she divorced. She then returned to school and completed her bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of Illinois-Springfield and met the love of her life, Raymond O'Connor. Married in 1987, they spent the next 30+ years of their lives traveling and settling into retirement in Sarasota and Longwood, Florida. This is a period when she truly blossomed and came into her own as our Grande Dame. She orchestrated family vacations and holidays and helped to create those family legends that included a rite-of-passage trip to Crater Lake, a dive bar/restaurant called "The Old Salty Dog," and bagel bites served on fine bone china on Thanksgiving Day. She also had some incredible stories of her youth that we could occasionally pry out of her (if you haven't heard her perspective on cousin Julia Child, you will need to know one of us pretty darn well to request, and actually receive, a copy of that.)

In Florida, she was finally able to enjoy her life with a man she loved, with few constraints on her time or bank accounts, ample quantities of Kendall-Jackson Chardonnay, and the proximity of her ten grandchildren. She was especially proud of the t-shirt she won at a DePauw University alumni event for having

the Most Grandchildren. And yes, she expected to speak to all three of her daughters between 1-2pm every Sunday.

Before her death, the last time Sylvia left her home was for her husband Ray's funeral several years ago. We think she would enjoy hearing her passing described as "death by a broken heart"... whether or not that is factually correct. She selected her burial site at Greenwood Cemetery in Orlando and would inspect photos of the headstone with both her and Ray's names on it. She approved. We also think she would approve of the term "grande dame," meaning an elderly woman of great prestige or ability. Her stories and legacy live on in her family.

She is survived by her daughters Louise (Greg) Holzhauer, Carolyn (Bill) Rylander, and Amy Van Bergen; Ray's daughters Theresa O'Connor and Anna Mahoney; her nephews David (Teresa) Francis and Alan (Kathy) Francis, and her niece Beth (Carol) Francis; her grandchildren: Judson (Meghan) Fisher, Maike (Carlos) Pacheco, Aubrey Fisher, Luke Rylander, Andrew (Ellen) Holzhauer, Wils Van Bergen, Carl Van Bergen Rylander, Claire Van Bergen, John Van Bergen, and Emma Rylander; and eight great-grandchildren.

The family of Sylvia O'Connor invites you to leave a message of condolence on the Tribute Wall created in her memory.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made in her memory to Down Syndrome Affiliates in Action. <https://www.dsaia.org/donate>

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