



Lena Margaret Lenti Gray

FEB 28, 1925 - MAR 22, 2024



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Funeral Home & Cemetery

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Those who best knew Lena Margaret Lenti Gray, who died Friday, March 22 at the age of 99, often found themselves gathered around her table.

Pans of meaty lasagna, tins of buttered biscuits, plates of rich chocolate pie, and holiday spreads piled with turkey, sage-spiked cornbread dressing, and marshmallow-topped sweet potato casserole often drew her family and friends together.

Lasagna, layered with creamy cheese and topped with hearty meat sauce, was among Lena's signatures. Born into an Italian farming community in Lucy, Tennessee, just north of Memphis, she grew up eating the food of her parents' homeland. Her parents, Pietro and Pierini (Conti) Lenti, immigrated from Bassignana and Rivarone, towns located in the Po River valley in northern Italy, but died when Lena was a young child. She was then raised by her mother's best friend, Camilla Novarese, whom she called YaYa, alongside "sisters" Mary and Rosie.

In the Novarese home, Lena learned that family life centered around and celebrated love of food, including produce grown on the family truck farm and the meals shared at YaYa's large kitchen table. Lena absorbed these lessons and carried them with her when she married Otis Gray in 1947 and they started their own home in Memphis.

In Memphis, home became a small three-bedroom house large enough for Lena to raise her family, which over the years included five children, her mother-in-law, a couple of baby chicks dyed the color of Easter eggs, two mother cats that each gave birth in a bedroom closet, and several dogs, including a beagle named Moses who frequently escaped the backyard, and later, a well-behaved Sheltie named Star. In the days before fences defined property lines, Lena's extended family also included the neighborhood women who gathered in one another's back yards in the afternoons, drinking coffee and catching up on the latest news before returning to their kitchens to cook dinner.



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Dinner often consisted of the tomatoes, eggplants, squash, and peppers picked from Lena's vegetable gardens. Zinnias, mixed with fragrant sprigs of basil or rosemary, became the center piece on her dining table.

It was breakfast, however, that was the real draw. Lena's biscuits were legendary among the generations of grandchildren and great-grandchildren that trekked to her house from as far away as Houston, Nashville, and Washington, D. C. The ingredients were simple—Gold Medal self-rising flour, milk, Crisco—and produced a final product flatter than most Southern biscuits. But what they lacked in rise they more than made up for in rich, otherworldly deliciousness. They were pulled from the oven, sliced, buttered, and piled into a dented silver tin that, for Lena's family, became the very symbol of her love and generosity.

Lena often fed her community, too, welcoming new neighbors with chocolate pies, sharing hunks of pound cake with life-long friends, and delivering Christmas fruit cakes to the parish staff at the Church of the Holy Communion, where she and Otis attended for more than seventy years and where Lena served on the Alter Guild.

Lena even fed the animals. The birds that frequented her backyard always found a full feeder and, on days when her family couldn't quite empty the silver tin at breakfast, scattered biscuit crumbs. Lena would pass peaceful hours watching cardinals, robins, and sparrows from her flower-ringed patio—and some less peaceful moments chasing off the uninvited squirrels.

Early mornings, before breakfast, was Lena's quiet time, when she said her prayers and remembered to God each member of her extended circle of family. If she was rushed on Friday mornings, when she had her weekly hair appointment with Kat, she'd drop her prayer beads into her purse and say her prayers while she was under the hair dryer.

A great irony of Lena's life was that despite being a voracious cook, she was never much of an eater. When her family tucked into heaping plates of lasagna, she was often content to nibble a few breadsticks; when the biscuit tin was passed round the table, she reached for a biscotti or a piece of knot bread.

For Lena, cooking was never about eating. It was about sharing. It was about love.



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Lena was preceded in death by her husband, Otis, who always insisted on dashing her scrambled eggs with Tabasco; her infant daughter, Cathy Marie; and son-in-law, David Charles Burttram.

Lena's son, Wayne, makes his mom's lasagna, step by step, whenever his own family gathers. Her eldest daughter, Lynn Burttram, inherited Lena's gardening green thumb and supplies the family with eggs from her growing flock of chickens. Middle daughter Pam Stratton now hosts the extended family's holiday meals, complete with a children's table, cousins' table, and a third for the adults. Lena's youngest daughter, Carol Dupree, prepares spaghetti using her mother's recipe—serving up a meal that's become legendary with her daughters and their friends.

Lena's recipes will continue to be made by her eight grandchildren (David Wayne; Melissa; Kent, Jr.; Gail; Jeff; Travis; Olivia; and Gianna). And they'll be passed down to her great-grandchildren (Parker, Brodie, Ella, Graycen, and Kensington).

The family will receive friends at a visitation at the Church of the Holy Communion (Episcopal), 4645 Walnut Grove Rd. in Memphis on Wednesday, April 3, starting at 12:00 pm, followed by a funeral service in the sanctuary at 1:00.

In lieu of flowers, the family suggests memorials be made to Church of the Holy Communion, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, or Le Bonheur Children's Hospital.



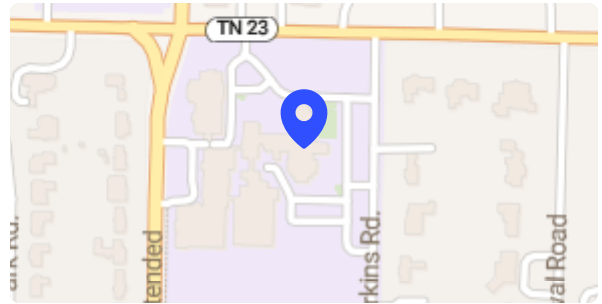
Events

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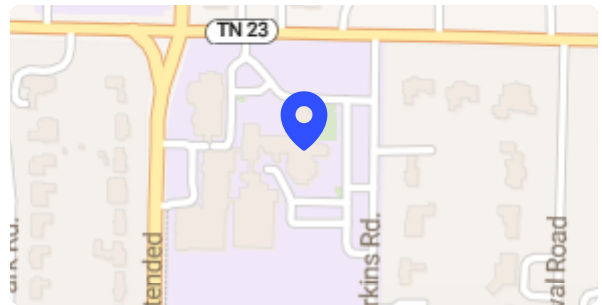
Visitation

- Wednesday**, April 3, 2024
- 12:00 PM - 1:00 PM CT
- Church of the Holy Communion**
4645 Walnut Grove Rd., Memphis TN 38117



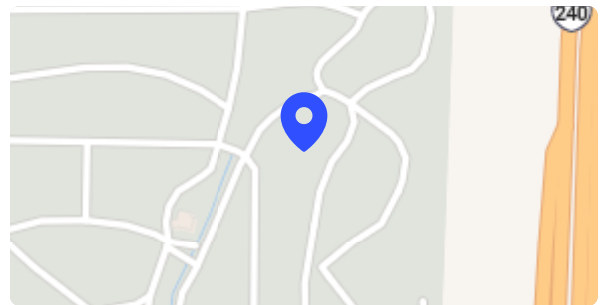
Funeral

- Wednesday**, April 3, 2024
- 1:00 PM CT
- Church of the Holy Communion**
4645 Walnut Grove Rd., Memphis TN 38117



Cemetery Details

- Memorial Park Cemetery**
5668 Poplar Ave, Memphis TN 38119
- (901) 445-8475**





Tribute Wall

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Anonymous sent a Pink Tribute Spray to the Gray family.



March 30 at 6:23 PM



Memories only last if you share them

Join us in honoring Lena Margaret by contributing to a collection of shared memories.



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