



Jeanne T. Varnell

February 4, 1937 - February 26, 2021

Jeanne Thompson Varnell, whose deep passion for education, equality, the arts, and health and wellness shaped a lifetime of purpose-driven philanthropy and civic leadership, died February 26, 2021. She was 84.

Jeanne was only 24 years old when she joined the board of the family foundation established in 1961 by her grandfather, J.R. Hyde Sr., and she actively served until its sunset in 2016. Acting on the family mantra – “to whom much is given, much is required” – she was a benefactor to numerous charitable and civic organizations. She was a board member of the National Civil Rights Museum; a founding member and trustee of the Women’s Foundation for a Greater Memphis; a board member of Ballet Memphis; a board member of the Med (now Regional One Health); board chair of United Methodist Neighborhood Centers; trustee of Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi; a member of the Vanderbilt Divinity School Board of Advisors; and a member and first woman chair of the Board of Trustees of Lambuth University in Jackson, Tennessee.

Her philosophy of servant leadership was the guiding principle for her philanthropy and community work. In recognition of her contributions, she received the Legends Award from the Women’s Foundation of Greater Memphis, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Memphis Y.W.C.A., and was one of six women in Tennessee to be honored by the Tennessee Human Rights Commission at its 50th anniversary celebration in Nashville. She also worked with many nonprofit organizations as a human relations trainer and consultant who led countless workshops aimed at building a better and just Memphis. Her compassion, sincerity, and humility inspired many to take their own places of leadership. The underpinnings of her life were an unshakeable faith, love of family, and a sincere commitment to equality galvanized by the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In the wake of Dr. King’s death, she was actively involved in The Memphis Panel of American Women, which attracted hostility and death threats as it focused on healing and understanding between the races. When describing the motivation for her philanthropy, she said it was aimed at “the last, the least, and the lost.”

She was raised in the United Methodist Church where her experiences were enriched by her grandparents’ deep faith, and as an adult, she would serve as a spiritual director helping others grow in their faith and helping guide their spiritual journeys. She and her

late husband of 34 years, Henry Varnell Jr., were partners in life and philanthropy, particularly in their support for Methodist ministries. Jeanne said they were motivated by Christian values in the broad sense: “We said what we wanted to do was to make a difference in people’s lives and that’s what we tried to do.”

Jeanne is survived by a daughter, Ruthie Bernabe (Jose) of Memphis; a son, Daly Thompson III of Sherman Oaks, California; a stepdaughter, Kay Ledbetter (Steve) of LaFayette, Georgia; a stepson, Henry Varnell III (Margaret) of Nashville; a goddaughter, Toni Dick (Quentin Heim) of Saratoga, California; 10 grandchildren, Olivia Bernabe, Jennifer Thompson, Jane Thompson, Michael Ledbetter (Kathryn Zdan), Drew Ledbetter (Andrus Nichols), Ria Martin (Colby), Henry Varnell IV (Elle), Mary Constance Little (Trent), Victoria Strain, and Meredith Strain; and four great-grandchildren, Nora Martin, Henry Varnell V, Jude Varnell, and Hudson Little. Jeanne was predeceased by her daughter, Laurence Gammon of Atlanta, and her stepdaughter, Ann Therese Strain of Memphis.

Jeanne often quoted Micah 6:8 – “What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” She answered the question affirmatively with a lifetime dedicated to others and to her God.

Jeanne will be buried at Memorial Park Cemetery following a private graveside service for family. A celebration of Jeanne’s life will be held at a later date.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations be made to Church Health, Women’s Foundation of Greater Memphis, and Asbury United Methodist Church.

Comments



“ Clay Marler Stone lit a candle in memory of Jeanne T. Varnell



Clay Marler Stone - March 06, 2021 at 08:29 AM