



Carolyn Payne Langfitt

February 21, 1928 - November 17, 2020

Carolyn Payne Langfitt, 92, a civic and charitable leader in Philadelphia, passed away on November 17 in Bryn Mawr, Pa. She was devoted to raising her four sons and supporting her husband of 52 years, the late Thomas William Langfitt, M.D. Her charitable work included counseling domestic abuse victims, helping poor students in Philadelphia, and the sick in Haiti. Carolyn was born in Baltimore in 1928 to Marie Louise Wilkinson and John Augustus Payne, a housebuilder. Her early memories included the Great Depression, when jobless men came to the back door of her family's rowhouse and her mother gave them food.

Carolyn's great aunt, Marie Bauernschmidt, was a tireless campaigner for integrity in Baltimore political life, and informed much of her thinking about the world. Marie also paid her tuition to Goucher College. Carolyn recalled that after Marie's husband died, "she kept all her subscription tickets, and took ME to the theater, and concerts, and art openings." Carolyn did the same for her sons and grandchildren.

After Goucher, she sailed to France with three friends from Baltimore for a grand tour of post-World War II Europe. Axel Gulbrandsen, a recent Danish law school grad, served as their driver and tour guide. From that summer grew a rich, transatlantic friendship between the Langfitts, Paynes and Gulbrandsens that has spanned seven decades and three generations. Following graduation, she went to work as the Wilmer librarian at Johns Hopkins Hospital. There she met Tom Langfitt, a dedicated medical student

and aspiring neurosurgeon, whom she married in 1953. The couple started a family and had four sons.

The Rev. Dr. Don Frank Fenn, the Episcopal rector of Saint Michael of All Angels in Baltimore, helped shape her faith, social conscience and liberal politics. After the arrest of Rosa Parks in 1955, she donated some of her salary to support desegregation efforts in Montgomery, Alabama.

The family moved to Philadelphia in 1960. Her boys kept her busy, but she always made time for family fun. Sons Tom and John accompanied her on bird watching trips near their summer home in Avalon, N.J., watching skimmers unzip the waters of the bay in search of fish.

She also planned what she envisioned as tranquil, bird-watching expeditions canoeing along the rivers of the Pine Barrens. With her sons and assorted cousins in tow, the excursions invariably disintegrated into races, splash fights, and flipped canoes. Her reaction was a “combination of outrage and delight,” John said.

Her son David recognized in his mother an appetite for risk and a desire for privacy. At age twelve, he announced plans to build his own home with a neighborhood friend in a hulking Dutch Elm in the family’s backyard.

“She said to us: ‘Swiss Family Robinson, that’s your goal, so make it beautiful,’” David recalled.

She watched the boys build a house twenty feet up, with a peaked roof, bunk beds, a porch, a rope ladder and electricity.

“She got what she wanted,” David said, “a varnished, trim, little house with a front porch in the limbs of a tree. All of us adored it.”

Carolyn loved the arts. She studied sculpture at the Philadelphia Museum of Art with Henry Mitchell, whose bronze statues of racing wild horses dot the Philadelphia area. As a young mother, she shaped figures of mothers and children in wax, which were later cast in bronze. She turned to wood working later in life and reproduced Shaker furniture at a work bench in the family garage.

“She indulged the creative spirit,” said David, “but it largely remained a

sideline, because she had so many responsibilities to her family and community.”

She was also passionate about literature, particularly the poetry of W.B. Yeats and works of James Joyce. She helped found Bloomsday at Philadelphia's Rosenbach museum. The annual celebration features dozens of Philadelphians consecutively reading passages from Ulysses aloud from the museum steps.

Years later, Carolyn and Tom were invited to a White House dinner hosted by Ronald Reagan. When she learned she'd be seated next to the president, she began to panic. She had voted against Reagan -- twice -- and wondered what they would talk about. The two spent the evening discussing their shared love of Irish poetry and literature. She found the president charming.

Carolyn had a deep faith which sustained her throughout her life. She served on the vestry at St. Asaph's Episcopal Church in Bala Cynwyd and as a trustee of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In addition, she served on the board of the Philadelphia Antique Show and served as president of the Cosmopolitan Club. She was a long-time member and significant supporter of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

In 1979, the couple's eldest son, Tom Jr., died at age 25. Carolyn worked mightily to hold the family together. Her husband was a hard-working physician and university administrator. Corralling him for extended family time had never been easy. But she came up with an offer no one in the family could refuse: an annual, two-week vacation over the Christmas holidays on a Bahamian island where there were no phones.

It worked.

Around this time, she focused her civic efforts in new directions, volunteering with Women's Way, a non-profit focused on women's issues. She counseled and accompanied victims of domestic violence to court to seek protective orders.

“She sensed that life can be short and she wanted to do something

meaningful and useful,” said Lynn Yeakel, who helped found the organization and served as its executive director.

Carolyn took a dim view of divorce, but gained new perspective from her experience helping battered women.

“What I saw changed my mind,” she said.

Yeakel recalled her as a loyal friend, who accompanied her to Baltimore for a major eye procedure, and invited her to use the family home in Avalon.

Carolyn went on to support and work annually at Hospital Albert Schweitzer, a charitable institution in rural Haiti. She developed a close friendship with co-founder Gwen Mellon. As Gwen’s eyesight deteriorated, she read books to her in the evening by lamplight. Carolyn’s husband, Tom, her brother John, an ophthalmologist, and her son John, a neuropsychologist, all donated their skills to the hospital. Her grandson, Daniel, lived at the hospital for two years, helping the community grow crops amongst trees to prevent soil erosion.

She also served as board chair of White-Williams Scholars, which provided stipends to honor academically promising students from low-income backgrounds in Philadelphia. She invited recipients to parties at her home, where she asked about their aspirations and offered encouragement.

Amy Holdsman, who served as executive director of White-Williams Scholars, said Carolyn was immersed in all aspects of the program, and had little patience for what Carolyn referred to as, “Big, I’m gonnas,” people who promise to do something, but fail to deliver.

“Getting to know your mom was such a treat,” recalled Holdsman. “She defied stereotypes. She had no tolerance for b.s.”

Carolyn was proud of her sons’ professional accomplishments and pleased with their choices of wives. “They have all married wonderful women,” she said.

Among her great joys was traveling with her husband Tom. She loved safaris in Africa, and trips with her brother Doug and his wife, Eloise, including one to Norway’s Lofoten islands. She traveled with her siblings and their wives to Israel. Carolyn and Tom also took two memorable journeys across China with

their son, Frank, and his wife, Julie. But perhaps nothing made her happier than spending time in Avalon with her sons and their wives, playing with her grandchildren, fishing and boogie-boarding, as she did, into her seventies. Carolyn was predeceased by her husband. She is survived by sons David Douglas (Margaret) of Bryn Mawr, John Turner (Emilie) of Rochester, NY, and Frank Davis (Julia) of Surrey, England. She is also survived by eight grandchildren, Daniel, Barbara, David, Sarah, William, Frank, Katherine and Christopher.

Services will be private with a memorial celebration to be scheduled later. In lieu of flowers, contributions of any amount may be sent to Hospital Albert Schweitzer, Haiti (via Grant Foundation, Po Box 81046, Pittsburgh, Pa. 15217).

Tribute Wall

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“ I was a student of Dr. Langfitt at Penn and a schoolmate of the younger Thomas Langfitt and listen to his brother in NPR regularly. I send my sympathy to this talented family for this loss.

CYNTHIA CRAIG OLDS - November 05, 2021 at 12:40 PM

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“ I knew your mother for many years as we served on the Hospital of U of Pa Doctors Wives Committee and others. She was a dear friend and a great mentor to me. YOu must be very proud of her. I will keep you all in my prayers at this sad time.
Carol Heppenstall

Carol HEppenstall - November 22, 2020 at 11:31 PM