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Nancy Hughes, wife of Ambassador William J. Hughes, dies at 82



Credit: pressofatlanticcity.com

Nancy Hughes, the wife of former Congressman and Ambassador to Panama William J. Hughes, died Thursday night at age 82, her family confirmed Friday.

For eight years she had battled a progressive neurodegenerative disease similar to ALS.

Born Nancy Gibson, she met Hughes at Rutgers University in Camden and married him in 1956. They soon moved to Ocean City, where they put down roots.

They had four children — Lynne Hughes, Barbara Sullivan, Tama Hughes and William J. Jr. — 10n grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

“She fought very long, and dad and mom were very courageous throughout the fight,” Barbara Sullivan said.

“My mom lived longer because of my dad,” said Lynne Hughes. She said her dad was the primary caregiver and kept her mom at home surrounded by love and family. “They were always holding hands.”

William J. Hughes Jr. said both his parents put family first.

“Mom and dad always said the best thing they ever did was have our family and raise our family,” he said.

Her children said Nancy was dedicated to being a mother and wife but also was a partner to her husband in all aspects of his work.

When he was ambassador to Panama, she got a top security clearance so she could talk to her husband about important issues.

“My dad was just reminiscing, saying what incredible political instincts she had,” said son William Jr. “She was not just his wife, partner and best friend but also his principal adviser. Her political and gut instincts were second to none. Dad always made sure to run things by her.”

She organized volunteers and handled vast direct-mail campaigns for her husband when he was running for Congress, her children said.

Before the days of automated systems for handling direct mail, Nancy would organize hundreds of volunteers to send thousands of pieces of mail throughout the 2nd Congressional District.

“One year there was so much mail the floor actually collapsed in the campaign office,” in Ocean City, William Jr. said.

She did a lot of fundraising for orphanages in Panama when they lived there, her children said, and was involved in planning for and funding Ocean City’s new high school and its performing arts center, which named for her and her husband.

She traveled with her husband and met with Cuban leader Fidel Castro when Hughes negotiated flyover rights, her children said.

The family worshipped at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Ocean City.

“Nancy was generous with her time, talents and treasure,” said Holy Trinity Senior Warden Sue Beakley. She said Bill and Nancy Hughes have worshipped there for decades and brought their children up in the church.

Stockton University President Harvey Kesselman sent out an email to the Stockton community Friday, informing them of Nancy Hughes’ death.

"Nancy was an extraordinary individual who gave so much to so many," Kesselman wrote. "She was an unwavering advocate of Stockton and was present at so many of our historic events. We will miss her immensely."

The William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University is named for Ambassador Hughes, who was a distinguished visiting professor at the school after his years as a congressman and diplomat.

"Nancy was a special person I met way back in the 1970s, when I had little kids and was volunteering on Bill Hughes' campaign," said Sharon Schulman, former director of the Hughes Center. "She was actively involved, interested in children, and taking care of her kids. Before it was popular, Nancy Hughes did it all with incredible grace."

She said Nancy was always there for her husband and children, but had her own identity.

Bill and Nancy donated memorabilia from Bill's career to the Hughes Center some years ago, and Schulman said she visited their Ocean City home to see what was being donated.

"There were 100 or more plaques," Schulman said. "We were walking around and Nancy was next to me going, 'Yes, yes, get them out of here. My walls will be free.'"

"She had quite a sense of humor," Shulman said.

Funeral arrangements are not yet set, family members said.