



Susan O'Hara

May 11, 1938 - July 1, 2018

Susan O'Hara of LaGrange Park, Illinois, passed away on July 1 in her home in Berkeley, California, at the age of 80. Born to Elfreda and Joseph O'Hara on May 11, 1938, Susan contracted polio in the fall of 1955 when she was a senior at Nazareth Academy High School, resulting in quadriplegia. Through the determination and ingenuity of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, Susan finished her coursework through an intercom system connecting her hospital bed to the classroom, graduating with her class in 1956. Susan then went on to receive her undergraduate degree from Rosary (Dominican University) College and her M.Ed from Loyola University in Chicago. Susan was then employed by Nazareth Academy to teach French and US History. She also served as Guidance Department Chair. Upon learning of the enhanced community accessibility and personal supports available to people with disabilities, she moved to Berkeley, California in 1974. This move proved to be of extraordinary significance.

Susan taught briefly at Holy Names High School in Oakland before beginning decades of professional development in independent living and disability rights advocacy. She was coordinator of the University of California's Disabled Students Program residence program, located in a dormitory on campus from 1975 to 1988. She helped scores of disabled students and their families make the transition from home to college including several who used iron lungs. Not only did she facilitate the transition for students, she also helped families and parents understand that living independently was not only possible for their children, it was essential so they could realize their own hopes and dreams. Susan assumed the role of Director of the program in 1988, retiring from the university in 1992. As an expert on supporting students with significant disabilities in higher education, she was frequently tapped to consult with advocates working to build such programs domestically and abroad. Following retirement, she played a leading role in establishing and building a collection of oral histories of leaders and sustainers of the Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement, and in the preservation of historical disability resources archived at UC-Berkeley's Bancroft library.

Susan was an ardent Francophile, and traveled extensively in Europe, publishing articles on her experiences for disabled travelers. She loved opera, poetry, tulips and peonies, Scrabble, good food and the company of her many friends.

Susan was preceded in death by her parents, and is survived by her four siblings: Edward O'Hara, Margaret Cain, Elizabeth O'Hara, and Kathleen O'Hara Gurney, and many beloved nieces and nephews. In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be made to the Joseph P. and Elfreda O'Hara Memorial Scholarship Fund c/o Angela Broucke at Nazareth Academy, located at 1209 Ogden Avenue, LaGrange Park, Illinois 60526. A Celebration of Life will occur at the Ed Roberts Campus on July 29th in Berkeley, California. A small service will be held at Notre Dame in Paris, a place she visited often and loved dearly, this spring. Notes of remembrance can be added on the website of Chapel of The Chimes at www.oakland.chapelofthechimes.com

Comments



“ To the O’Hara family, my deepest condolences.

Loretta Cattani - September 11, 2018 at 01:35 PM



“ Susan, I only had the honor of meeting you once. You made a lasting impression. To the O’Hara family, my deepest condolences

Loretta Cattani - September 11, 2018 at 01:32 PM



“ My dear friend Susan Your patience as I attended to you (1985-86), your refined culture, your knowledge in many subjects and your unique sense of humor have defined our very special relationship. Going back home, to France, after some years we lost contact and I do regret not having made some effort to avoid that. I am sorry for it. Not a week passed however without my thinking of you. This July, while visiting friends in California, I read your obituary by an extraordinary coincidence. I am profoundly sad today but I also know it has been a life changing experience and privilege to know you Susan. My deepest condolences to your family Ma chère amie Susan, Ta patience lorsque je prenais soin de toi (1985-86), ta culture raffinée, ton savoir sur de multiples sujets et ton sens de l’humour unique ont défini notre amitié si particulière. En rentrant en France, mon pays, après quelques années nous avons perdu le contact. Je suis vraiment désolée de ne pas avoir fait les efforts nécessaires pour conserver notre lien. Cependant il ne s’est jamais passé une semaine sans que je pense à toi. En ce moment (Juillet) je suis en visite en Californie de France et par coïncidence j’apprends ton décès. Je suis profondément triste aujourd’hui mais je sais aussi que te rencontrer à changéma vie et a été un grand privilège. Mes pensées vont à ta famille.

Sophie Vallée- Batrouni - July 23, 2018 at 03:32 PM



“ It’s the end of a very long road with really countless lovely memories of spending time with Susan, her family and her friends. We were exceedingly grateful for the opportunity to have one last meal with her just days before she died. She was not well but insisted on going ahead with plans for getting together. When we said our goodbyes we all knew it could be the last time. It was a great gift to be able to say that kind of farewell. Sadly, we will not be able to attend the celebration-of-life event and will miss our chance to grieve with family and friends that we may not see again. We send you our love and our gratitude for having had these many years if sharing your company.

Greg Martin and Susan Springborg - July 22, 2018 at 04:42 PM



“ Susan transformed the lives of many people and changed the world through her work in the DSP at UC Berkeley and her work in the disability movement archives in the Bancroft Library. I loved working with her and being with her. Thank you, Susan.

Sue Schweik - July 22, 2018 at 03:25 PM



“ Susan was Director of DSP during my time at Cal and was one of my earliest role models of traveling abroad, and as a disabled woman working full time. I will miss her warmth and dignity.

Naomi Armenta - July 20, 2018 at 09:09 AM



“ Condolences from the Kaspari family on the loss of our cousin Susan. We have many happy childhood memories of visits back and forth between the Kaspari and the O’Hara families. Susan was an inspiration to all of us, and through the years we were very proud of her many accomplishments.

Jackie Kaspari Binenfeld - July 19, 2018 at 02:06 PM



“ Words cannot express the gratitude I feel for having had Susan in my life. I first met Susan as a young Cal student when she mentored a group of us who were complaining about an access issue. She asked us, “What can YOU do about it?” She told wonderful stories about her early days at Cal, when she rolled into her “dorm room”, aka a wing of the campus hospital, expecting to find “a bunch of sick people” but instead finding an endless party where she was handed a cup of Scotch! Over the years she has been a wonderful friend, always greeting me with a smile. I will treasure that last meal we shared about a year ago of tea and, of course, French cookies. Bless you Susan!

Megan Conway - July 18, 2018 at 05:49 PM



“ I met Susan O’Hara in 1988 one year before I transferred to UC Berkeley. One of the first impressions that struck me was Ms. O’Hara’s charm and grace. I will never forget how comfortable she made me and, especially, my parents feel about leaving the nest. She spoke of the services of the Disabled Students’ Residence Program, but her words had so much more meaning. Susan was living proof that disabled people like me could live independently. Whenever I saw her, I could feel the affection Susan had for her students emanating from her sparkling eyes; it felt like a spiritual embrace. . . You’ll always be in me heart. Love, Aydan Aysoy

Aydan Aysoy - July 18, 2018 at 05:13 PM



“ I owe my great independence to Susan! In 1983 when I visited CAL I met with Susan with my parents to decide if I could really go to School at Berkeley and live independently with supports. When the meeting was over and everyone was saying goodbye Susan looked directly into my eyes and whispered “see you next year”. She was the first person who truly saw my abilities despite my significant disability. Now I teach Disability Studies at Northern Arizona University and have a 16 year old son. I am in the middle of writing an article about the Residence Program at UC Berkeley to try to shed light onto that unique program. Susan changed my life and she was truly an angel in my life!!!

Matthew Wangeman - July 07, 2018 at 06:18 PM