

Beth Elise Wait Jacobs

Distinguished Churchill High School Educator 1930-2022

Beth Elise Jacobs graduated with honors on October 28, 2022. According to her family, the distinguished Nevada educator died in Reno after beating cancer but not dementia after a series of strokes. She was five weeks short of her 92nd birthday.

The third of four siblings, she was born on December 6, 1930, in Hannaford, North Dakota, to longtime Hannaford Mayor Chauncey Wait and his wife Alice.

"My dad was the only Democrat in our small town but was still elected mayor many times," she often noted. During the Great Depression, he extended credit at his store and gas station to many of the farming area's residents. He also cultivated a large vegetable garden next to the store which fed his family and some of the townsfolk.

Beth was a varsity basketball point guard and valedictorian in high school. She graduated from Mayville Teachers College (now Mayville State University) in Mayville, ND. As evidenced by her later coaching success, she learned early how to compete and to fight. That included beating breast cancer with a successful lumpectomy in her mid-80s.

She taught at K-12 levels in North Dakota, Montana, and Nevada. She and her husband Jack Anderson had three children, Laurie, Elise and Mark. The young family migrated west attempting to alleviate the asthma symptoms of their youngest, Mark Lowell Anderson. They finally settled in the clear air of Ely, Nevada, where she taught at the elementary and high school levels. She also developed a thriving clientele teaching piano.

In 1977, the Nevada Dept. of Education praised her performance and those of her speech students at White Pine High School.

"I do not recall in 25 years in education a more consistently superior level of performance than your and their presentations!" wrote NDE official Tom Summers.

"I think you did a masterful job of directing and working with them," he added.

It was a harbinger of things to come.

She spent several years in Oregon while married to Tom Jacobs where they developed real estate projects. She returned to teaching at Churchill County High School in Fallon, Nevada where she taught English, theater and forensics (speech arts).

In Fallon, she became friends with the late Churchill County Commissioner John Hanifan and his wife, Starlene. Several members of the Hanifan family were in her classes, including Mike, a member of her championship debate teams.

Her Greenwave team won the University of Nevada Invitational and placed second in the Southern Utah State College Invitational which included more than 1,700 contestants from Utah, Idaho and Nevada.



The team's star, Troy Keeping, went on to compete in the 1982 Nationals in San Francisco, making it to the semi-finals and finishing eighth overall in prose and poetry. In a 1982 yearbook photo with Beth and her 28-member team, Mr. Keeping holds the single largest trophy.

Beth lives on through her art and her students. One Ely alumna is a respected longtime Reno registered nurse. A Fallon student rose to the top of Nevada education.

Mike Hanifan recently retired as a U.S. Army brigadier general and assistant adjutant general of the Nevada Army Guard. Beth attended his installation at Stead several years ago.

Debate champion Troy Keeping became a very successful businessman and today resides in Lexington, Kentucky. He and his wife visited Beth in Reno shortly before she passed away.

"The lessons and skills you taught me helped shape my future. I became a powerful CEO and recently retired," Keeping told her. Fallon grad Dale Erquiaga went on to several positions in Nevada government, including state superintendent of public instruction. Today, he serves as acting chancellor of the Nevada System of Higher Education.

"I am writing to express my gratitude for the time we spent together at Churchill County High School," Erquiaga stated to his teacher last summer.

"As you know, I was recently named Acting Chancellor of the Nevada System of Higher Education. It's the capstone of a long career in public service, and I have you to thank for getting me started.

"When you came to Fallon, I was shy and awkward, quite unsure of myself. The way you approached drama and debate gave me confidence. You even attempted to teach me to sing in the role of Marryin' Sam when you bravely decided we should stage the first high school musical ('Li'l Abner') in Fallon in many years. Although I was never able to carry a tune, you convinced me it was okay to stand on stage and do my best. You allowed me to help with 'Damn Yankees' and you coached me through an oratory competition at a debate tournament. That training helps me to this day.

"I still shy away from public speaking, but I know how to get through it because of the foundation you gave me," Erquiaga added.

"I remember fondly how you came to Fallon as an 'outsider.' You seemed quite brave and glamorous to this local boy, and I know you stood up for yourself – and your students – during your time there. Many of us were positively influenced by the example you set.

"Please know that I and many others remember the impact you had on our lives. You are never far from my thoughts when I step up to a podium! Thank you," Erquiaga concluded.

Beth indeed cut a glamorous figure driving her 280-Z sports car and was not afraid to do big things in a small town. She was a longtime member of the Nevada State Education Association, the teachers union.

While 1982's "Li'l Abner" was well received, the conservative Fallon population largely boycotted the 1983 production of the baseball fantasy "Damn Yankees." The 1955 Bob Fosse/Gwen Verdon Broadway smash later became a major Hollywood movie, both based on the book "The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant."

"They just couldn't fathom a show with a cuss word in the title," Beth remembered noting the show's greatest hit, "You Gotta Have Heart." Perhaps that song best encapsulates her life.

"I became a strong contender for coach of the year, but the good ole boy system was just not ready to let a woman to hold that title," Beth remembered.

That snub and the "Damn Yankees" brouhaha contributed to her decision to leave Fallon not long thereafter. Her students gave her a surprise going-away party at a Fallon pizza restaurant.

When informed of her death, Chancellor Erquiaga wrote "Thank you for letting me know. Saddened by this news. She was brave and inspired that characteristic in others."

She closed out her teaching career at Gerlach High School in northern Washoe County. She met her third husband Jesse Phillips in Gerlach, the rural community which later attained international fame as the hometown of Burning Man.

The biggest things to hit Gerlach prior to the annual party on the playa were attempts to break the world land speed record.

Beth and the townsfolk spent a lot of time rooting for the British team as they made several attempts, finally succeeding in 1997. Royal Air Force pilot Andy Green's world record still stands. After an earlier attempt, the Brits found themselves with an extra airline ticket. They gave it to Beth who used her summer for a solo sojourn to Great Britain and France. She also enjoyed an Alaska ocean cruise during another break from school. She met and married Jesse Phillips during her time in Gerlach.

Beth retired in 1995 and moved to northwest Reno. Like her Fallon students, her Gerlach charges treated her to a warm going-away party. They presented her with an extra-large t-shirt emblazoned with "I'm retired, and this is as dressed-up as I get." It is covered in warm and grateful handwritten messages. She kept it for the rest of her life.

In retirement, Beth supported various charities and political campaigns but focused mostly on the arts. One of the high points came when she attended the great tenor Luciano Pavarotti's only Reno performance. Despite being born with short fingers, the former piano teacher honed her proficiency playing works of Chopin on her Steinway grand piano. Beth delighted in giving occasional free concerts, especially at the Washoe County Senior Center.

On summer mornings, she would often open the patio door of her northwest Reno home and fill the air with Chopin and show tunes.

She was an accomplished acrylic and watercolor painter and her home evolved into a personal art gallery. Beth's fine sense of interior design completed the showcase which became a creative environment for old friends and new, often invited over for test readings of her plays.

"She was an excellent seamstress and could re-cover furniture in her sleep," her daughter Laurie remembers.

Beth was a voracious Sudoku solver and a fine baker, especially during the holidays. With her son, Mark, they would turn her kitchen into a white-floury Christmas card accomplished while making the traditional Swedish crepe, lefse. Beth eventually relented on the annual internal snowstorm and began ordering lefse by mail.

She wrote and copyrighted several plays and books of poetry. Under the pen name of "Bewaj Phillips" (a combination of her life's various initials), she published "Sex, Politics and Other Confusing Stuff," an illustrated book of poetry with titles including "Ode to Eleanor Roosevelt," "Mother-in-Law from Hell," "To Lysistrata" and "Then We'll Burn All the Books." Some of her poems will be uploaded to her new website, BethNVedu.org/

Remembrances may be sent to <Memories@BethNVedu.org>

Beth was preceded in death by her parents; former husbands Jack Anderson, Tom Jacobs and Jesse Phillips; her son, Mark; daughter Lynn Marie who died at birth; sisters Lois Marie Cronk of California and Vonna "Lucy" Lou Jahner of Idaho; and her brother Mark Alton Wait who became a basketball star at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, the national research institution for the hearing impaired.

Beth is survived by her daughters, Laurie Ferrin (Paul) of Carson City; Elise Weatherly and great-grandson Joshua Weatherly of Sun Valley, Nev.; granddaughter Heather Purkeypyle of Reno; nephew Paul Jahner (Anita) of Idaho; nieces Jennifer Jahner (Brad) of the State of Washington, and Carol Morris (Ron) of California; 12 great- and great-great nieces and nephews; her education colleague Jay Eck of Verdi, Nevada, and her next-door neighbor and biographer, Andrew Barbano.

Her ashes will be scattered at some of her favorite places. She requested that any remembrances in her name be donated to the Reno Domestic Violence Resource Center (formerly Committee to Aid Abused Women – CAAW).

Raised a North Dakota Lutheran Swede, she professed no organized religion in her later years. She chose instead to seek spirituality in her writings. The following excerpt is from her book which will be made available to local schools and libraries. It resulted from the hurtful actions of the minister of an Oregon church where she had served as a volunteer organist.

God Abandoned Me

*Rising so slowly at tirade of words
I spoke so those around me heard.*

"I don't have to stay and listen to this."

The words sobbed from a darkened abyss.

As tears streamed down disquieted face

I quickened my step as I quitted the place.

I thought God's love for me had died.

But I found Him again when I stepped outside.

The complete poem is posted at her website along with photos spanning her life. All submissions are welcome.

Beth Elise Wait Anderson Jacobs Phillips lives on in her work, her family, her friends and especially her students. Remember her fondly in high humor, support public education and perform an occasional kindness in her honor — especially to wandering cats.



Beth and Baby Mark once upon a time.

Much more at BethNVedu.org

Send remembrances to Memories@BethNVedu.org

Remember your mom this Mothers' Day