

Nancy Hughes Remembered For Grace, Strength

By **mvitale** - January 7, 2018



Bill and Nancy Hughes, of Ocean City, spent a lifetime together working for the community. Nancy passed away Thursday.

By Maddy Vitale

In over 61 years of marriage, it was hard for Bill Hughes to recall a favorite moment with his wife Nancy and their four children.

There were so many.

In the course of a lifetime, the Hughes family has remained extremely close and grounded, the family said. And all the while, Nancy was the loving wife, political confidant and campaign manager as well as her favorite role – mother and homemaker.

“She was my beautiful bride, my love, my partner and closest advisor throughout my career,” Hughes, 85, a former ambassador and congressman, said in an interview Saturday.

“We traveled extensively during my years in Congress,” he continued. “Particularly, we traveled around the world to areas like South America, Columbia and Peru when it was safe for her to go. She often sat in on meetings with me. She was my primary advisor – always.”

Nancy died at home in hospice care Thursday night at 82, after an eight-year battle with a neurological disease, like ALS. She remained strong and loving to the end, Hughes said. Their four children, Bill Jr., Lynne, Barbara and Tama Hughes, were there for their parents and supportive throughout the difficult disease. The funeral date has not been set yet, but family said it will be late next week, with services at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Ocean City.

Long before Hughes became a lawyer or entered politics, Nancy was by his side. While their marriage spanned decades, their courtship was relatively short – just nine months.

They met when they were students at Rutgers University in Camden. Hughes was in his first year of law school there, and he would see her pass by his classroom several times a week.

“The professor even got involved,” Hughes remarked. “He would say, ‘There she goes.’ That was before hazing, but I guess I was sort of hazed.”

One of Hughes' friends knew Nancy and introduced them. They married and moved to Ocean City, where Hughes got a court clerkship. "We fell in love with Ocean City and never left," he said. "She loved Ocean City and wanted to raise our children here."

The couple put down roots and became active in the community and became a member of the Episcopal Church in Ocean City.

When Hughes became a Congressman, and had to travel to Washington D.C., Nancy took care of the household, took the children to school and after-school activities, and managed their warehouse business.

"I commuted every morning when I was a congressman. Nancy took care of everything. We talked every day," Hughes said.

Throughout Hughes' 50 years in office, Nancy would not only help with his campaigns and speak at functions in his absence, but in the early days of his political career, she would write the press releases.

"Throughout life she was vivacious, full of life, full of fun, strong willed and probably one of the strongest women I have ever known. Most importantly, she was the love of my life," Hughes said.

Despite busy schedules, Bill and Nancy Hughes remained committed to bringing up their children with one basic principle: Family comes first.

Some of their most enjoyable times were the travel excursions by RV, camping trips to New Hampshire, Maine, Vermont, the Outer Banks in North Carolina, Virginia – even a trip to Disneyworld. The couple also enjoyed many years vacationing at their home in St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"We were always reminiscing about the happy days camping with the children," Hughes said. "We loved those years. We also loved our time in St. Thomas and the children did too."

Bill Hughes Jr. recalled the fond memories of camping with his parents. He described them as "always a team."

"We had such wonderful memories in that RV. We camped in it. We went on adventures in it. We campaigned in it," Hughes Jr. said.

He spoke of his mother's versatility and her strength.

"My mom was an incredible woman, who seemed to be able to do it all. She cooked, she sewed, she made our Halloween costumes, and turned around and worked with an army of volunteers in my dad's campaigns," Hughes Jr. said.

"Then she would travel with my dad and the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration). They met with Fidel Castro in Cuba, went to Africa, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel. They would come back, and mom would yell at us kids to clean up our rooms," he added. "Then she would turn around and go to a White House dinner. Their life was one adventure after another."

Lynne Hughes recalled some definite rules at the dining room table.

"My mother insisted that when we were at the dining room table, we would get just five minutes to talk about the law and politics – combined. Sometimes we would have breakfast on the Boardwalk and the same rule applied. We would just throw in the towel," she joked. "My parents instilled the type of family values that they wanted us to have. Family was important to them."

Nancy would whip up dinner five days a week and then head to work on her husband's campaign headquarters until 9 p.m. and shuttle the children to school and activities the next day.

"My mom has been such a big part of our lives. She will continue to be. There is not one memory that I can point out because we have too many happy memories," Lynne said. "My mom was a class act. She was just full of grace. She was very strong and politically astute, but she was quiet about it."

Throughout it all, the couple maintained their loving bond.

"My parents had a true love story," Lynne said. "Both of them were very grounded. Family always came first."

The Hughes family has 10 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren, ages 32 to 2. Barbara Hughes Sullivan said she is so grateful that her mother got to hold every baby.

"I think most people would agree mom was vivacious and loving. She was unbelievable," Barbara said.



Nancy and Bill Hughes were a team in both political and family endeavors. (Courtesy the Hughes family)

Tama Hughes said her mom was full of dignity and grace and courageous.

"The last couple of years don't define who she was in a lifetime. Because of who she was, she was so brave in the last couple of years," Tama said. "She and my dad knew where they came from and where they were. They never forgot their roots. I think they tried to make every place a better place."

Family always came first, but Bill and Nancy Hughes also forged many friendships throughout the years.

Perhaps their closest friends were Ed and Marilyn Salmon. They met in 1972 when Ed Salmon was a commissioner in Millville.

"Ambassador Hughes was the model for anybody wanting to serve in public office, and Nancy was his partner in it all," said Ed Salmon, chairman of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

"Bill and Nancy Hughes' lives together have made an impact on Ocean City, South Jersey, New Jersey, America, and internationally," Salmon said. "In life, you meet some very special people. We would put Bill and Nancy as two of the most special people. They always wanted to help others and serve others. That has been their life – a life of service and a love for the region."

But what Salmon remembered most about Nancy was her parenting skills.

"What delighted me was the joy she took with her children. When you saw her with them, they just blended so joyfully," he said. "Nancy was such a gracious person and had such a special way about her."

Marilyn Salmon called Nancy a spontaneous person who didn't want the spotlight, but who worked hard for her husband and family.

"She wasn't shy. She had a wonderful sense of humor and was so loving," Marilyn Salmon said.

In the last years of Nancy's life, Marilyn would visit with her friend weekly and read with her. "We had a wonderful friendship and special times together," she said.

The Salmons also remarked that you couldn't mutter the name Bill Hughes without thinking of Nancy.

"They were a team," Ed Salmon said.

The impact of Nancy and Bill Hughes on the region with their philanthropy and giving spirit is very much both of their legacies, Salmon also noted.

Sharon Schulman, retired executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy, said Nancy was much more than a colleague; she was a friend and mentor.

"My memories of Nancy Hughes go back to the '70s. In those days, Nancy helped coordinate everything. Long before it became popular to do everything, Nancy Hughes did everything. She was the mother, the wife, the campaign organizer and she did it all with such grace," Schulman said. "For me, she was one of those special people. She cared about people. She wasn't the one making the public speeches, but she would have conversations with people. She always knew how to look for ways to make things better."

Schulman said Nancy would attend all of the events at the Hughes Center. Later, when she became too ill to attend a function at the Hughes Center in her husband's honor, Schulman said everyone felt her strength and support in the room, because she was such a big part of the center.

"Those of us who knew Nancy felt she was there with us," Schulman said.

Ocean City Schools Superintendent Kathleen Taylor explained how much Nancy meant to the school district and the community. The performing arts center is named in honor of the Hughes family.

"Ambassador and Mrs. Hughes had the foresight in 2004 to ensure that the PAC was not just a place, but an event – a happening. With its warmth, beauty, intimacy, and friendliness, the PAC makes sure that memories are happening, for now and for future generations," Taylor said. "That is an incredible legacy that Mrs. Hughes has given to our school district and to us all. We are eternally grateful."



This photo of Bill and Nancy Hughes is from the Hughes Collection at Stockton University. (Courtesy Stockton University)
