

Calden, Ruth



MADISON—Ruth Calden, age 92, passed away peacefully on Aug. 15, 2019. Ruth was born on Feb. 23, 1927, to Hilda and Neil DeBruyn in Grand Rapids, Mich. As a young girl, she spent several glorious summers living in a tent on the shores of Lake Michigan with her Aunt Anna. This experience, along with the writings of Henry David Thoreau introduced to her by her father, shaped her love of nature and the simple joys of life from an early age. Ruth graduated from Union High School in 1945, and earned a scholarship to Grand Rapids Junior College. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English at the University of Michigan in 1949, and during those years, met the love of her life, George Calden.

They married in 1949, and then settled in Madison, Wis. Ruth taught 5th grade at Nakoma School from 1951-52, before raising her four children.

Ruth was a kind, caring and energetic person who lived her life richly, fully, and gracefully, helping others right up until the very end. She cherished her family and through her wide social network, touched the lives of many. Ruth had a broad range of interests. Her passions included music of many kinds, art, dancing, film, animals and the natural world, canoeing, camping, local history, social justice, and world travel. For more than 40 years, she played recorder and Inca flute in various ensembles, including performing over 500 gigs with her husband George in their international folk music quartet the Ethnic Connection. She was active for 51 years in a twelve-woman book group that she helped form, as well as Spanish classes, water exercise, creative writing, poetry, and volunteerism. When her vision began to fail, she organized a local low vision support group. Ruth and George were longtime members of the Prairie Unitarian Universalist Society, where Ruth sang in the choir, played recorder, and along with other services, led an annual Day of the Dead service based on Mexican traditions. Ruth spent several years compiling two volumes detailing the 50 years of Prairie history, along with three other church members which was published in the spring of 2019, an accomplishment of which she was very proud.

Love of travel took Ruth and George to the Soviet Union, Galapagos Islands, Mexico, Haiti, Israel, Europe, and Cuba. Ruth equally enjoyed exploring the small towns of Wisconsin. A favorite pastime was checking out fish fries at various iconic Wisconsin supper clubs. She was a lifelong supporter of girls' and women's sports, and she and her son Tom were avid UW women's volleyball and hockey fans.

Ruth found particular joy in classical music, nature, and having a warm cat on her lap. Throughout her long life, she never lost her sense of wonder and delighted especially in the song of the jenny wren, the dunes of Lake Michigan, the sand bars of the Wisconsin River, native spring wildflowers, and burying her face in May lilac blossoms at the Arboretum. In keeping with her youthful exuberance, Ruth's hair never turned gray. Her spirit was unfailingly cheerful and generous, and her long list of friends could always count on her for help and support.

Ruth is survived by her four children, Lisa Calden of Berkeley, Calif., Dr. Martha Calden (Jacqueline Denn) of Chicago, Ill., Virginia Calden and Thomas Calden of Madison; and her brother, Jack (Joan) DeBruyn of Fort Mill, S.C.; five nieces and four nephews; a wide circle of dear friends; and her beloved cat, Cricket. She was preceded in death by her husband, George Calden; and brother, Richard DeBruyn.

A memorial service to celebrate Ruth's life will take place at the First Unitarian Society of Madison, 900 University Bay Drive, on Oct. 25, 2019, at 5:30 p.m. Memorial donations can be made to Doctors Without Borders, World Wildlife Fund, or Dane County Humane Society.

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