



Photo by Sheila Gamble-Dorn

Mary Harris, on the occasion of her 100th birthday, is feted by her Shelter Cove family.

The passing of a beloved centenarian

By Jean Bartlett

Features Writer

A little more than a month shy of her 101st birthday, longtime Pacifican Mary Harris left this world on May 11. Born on June 29, 1917, to Ira and Eva Crofoot in Wilson, Kansas, Mary's clear-eyed, thoughtful way of looking at things and her interest in both contributing to life and listening to life made her ageless. For those who knew her, her death has turned the world a bit upside down.

"Mary Harris could be seen as a legend herself, were it not for the warmth and lively intelligence that she brings to all her interactions," wrote Sanchez Art Center Program Manager Melinda Lightfoot about the artist for the June 2017 Sanchez Art Center exhibit of Mary's works, a retrospective titled, "A Colorful Life: Mary Harris at 100."

"The artist worked as a teacher of young children most of her life," Lightfoot went on to write. "She even taught for a few months at the Sanchez Elementary School – the campus that now houses the Pacifica Center for the Arts. Mary was instrumental in rooting art at the former elementary school with her participation in the Schools with Art Program, SWAP." (With SWAP, artists taught art to elementary school students in exchange for studio space.)

Mary moved to Pacifica, Shelter Cove specifically, in 1957. She taught kindergarten in Pacifica, with "lots of art and music." She left Pacifica in 1960 to teach in Taiwan. Two years later she returned, studied Japanese and art at SFSU, and then left to teach art in Japan for two years, Germany for one and Paris for two. In 1970, she returned to Pacifica – and Shelter Cove – and taught locally until she retired in 1983. In 1983, she also received her MA. She went on to teach art in the District for 20 years. As to Shelter Cove, she was a faithful resident until her death.

"I first met Mary in 1984," said longtime Pacifican, artist and art educator Andrew Leone. "She and I shared a studio at the Center for 11 years and she was the best artist studio mate one could imagine. She was the easiest person to get along with. She was extremely considerate and patient with everyone."

Andrew and Mary were the only artists at the Center before it was the Art Center, and the two gave the future artists' space its kick-start, with many more individuals then leaping in to make the dream a reality.

"I met Mary at Sharp Park School when she was part of SWAP," said longtime Pacifican, photographer and retired teacher Sharron Walker. "She came to my class over several years, and engaged the second and third graders in a challenging, creative and loving way. She was a joy and she was a role model to so many, including me."

Sharron was involved with two Pacifica Historical Society "Footprints of Pacifica" episodes on Mary Harris: "Mary Harris of Shelter Cove" and "Mary Harris Artist." Both films will be airing on local Channel 26. Check your Tribune and PCT-26 for dates.

Mary was committed to what she believed in. She was a longtime supporter of the Democratic World Federalists, the ACLU, Greenpeace, the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Sierra Club, KQED, KPFA, the Sanchez Art Center and the Art Guild of Pacifica. She lived her own golden rule, daily. "Be yourself. Be your best self."

David Heartlife "Hearty" was Mary's friend and Shelter Cove neighbor for 25 years.

"We used to walk along the beach and up and down the stairs together," Hearty said. (That would be the 162 stairs that are the only way in and out of the Cove.) "We talked about community and world affairs. She always shared amazing insight and wisdom when pondering challenging situations. She was an incredibly strong, intelligent, determined, compassionate and creative human being. And she was a unifier, completely devoted to local and world peace."

Artist and longtime Pacifican Nancy Russell knew Mary for nearly 30 years. It was their mutual volunteerism at the Center that turned their friendship into family.

"Mary had the most positive outlook on life and the world around her," Nancy said. "Her passion for world peace, justice and fairness was inspiring. Mary taught by example that doing what you love is really important."

Following a stroke, Mary was taken to Seton Medical Center on May 1.

"Mary's Shelter Cove family brought her radio for classical music and an ocean sound machine, so her room sounded just like her home," Nancy said. "There was singing too. As word spread that Mary was at Seton, she had a constant flow of visitors."

Mary was moved to the Zen Hospital Project in San Francisco on May 9, where she was when she passed.

"I believe there is a place in the universe where we go, when we leave this life," Mary told this writer in a previous interview. "I don't believe in zero after death. I believe I will see my family and friends, whenever I leave here."

Plans are in the works for a celebration of Mary's life at the Sanchez Art Center in June. Details to follow.

Donations in honor of Mary may be made to the Democratic World Federalists, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or the Sanchez Art Center.

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