

Julie Forsmith Obituary

Julianne Forsmith, beloved teacher at Butte Community College for 30 years, therapist, mother, and grandmother died December 12, of pulmonary failure. She was 86 years old.

Julie was hired by Butte College, as the drama and speech teacher in 1969. She immediately created a full theater program and started directing plays each regular academic quarter, providing acting and stagecraft opportunities to students and community members alike. Though she did not shy away from plays with adult themes, her spring productions were always appropriate for children and would tour to rural schools around the county. Her Thanksgiving table always welcomed quirky student actors with no other place to go. Many of her students and actors from the community kept in touch for the rest of her life.

Julie spent summers and sabbaticals broadening her knowledge of theater. One year she studied with American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, another she worked on Broadway in New York.

Julie started life in Jamestown, New York, but the family soon moved to New York City where her father Albert Forsmith set up a factory to make suits. He was a self-educated, voracious reader who loved learning. Julie inherited that love.

Her mother Celia was organized, well put together, and known as an elegant hostess. Julie's older sister Jackie was much like their mother. By contrast Julie was absent-minded, often lost her house key, and thrived in creative chaos.

Julie's mother contracted Hodgkins disease when Julie was just 6 years old and was ill until she died when Julie was 19. Julie's father contracted another form of lymphoma when she was 15 and died within months. Julie's mother, concerned for her daughter's future, approved of Julie marrying Dan Neifeld, who was in the National Guard and six years Julie's senior. Julie married at 18 years old.

In 1956, Dan, Julie and their first two children moved to Phoenix, Arizona. By the age of 26 Julie had four children, Alan, Charles, Sharon, and Robert. By all appearances, she was a model American housewife.

Curious to expand her horizons, Julie started taking classes at the local junior college. Her biology assignment was to dissect a fetal pig. The teacher said, "I don't want to catch you taking your pig home." So she made sure she was not caught and dissected her pig with her children watching so they could learn too.

Contrary to her husband's wishes, Julie wanted to work and got a modeling/ acting job making commercials for Totem Department Store. She used her first check to buy bicycles for her children.

Her marriage failed in an era when divorce was not yet common and women were mostly excluded from most forms of employment. Divorced with four children to support at 32, in 1967, Julie decided to become a college teacher and left Phoenix with the intention to get a PhD in history at UC Santa Barbara. The first semester she transferred to the Drama program, eventually earning her Master's degree.

For years Julie worked full time teaching during the day, came home to make dinner for her kids, and often left again in the evening to rehearse the latest play.

Following a sabbatical year where she traveled and studied theater productions across Europe, North Africa and Asia, she returned to budget cuts and academic politics that meant she would not be directing plays but would instead teach history as well as more speech classes. With evenings free she started to study psychology, not for a purpose, just because she was interested. Before long she had a Masters degree in counseling and earned her MFCC license. Soon after, she was working evenings as a therapist.

Julie lived many places around Chico but her favorite was the co-housing community of Valley Oaks Village. She became close to many families, enjoyed cooking community meals, and curated art exhibits in the common rooms. She only left Valley Oaks after she retired from Butte College and counseling. She moved to Berkeley to be closer to her children and grandchildren.

Though not a religious person per se, Julie studied Zen Buddhism, practiced meditation, and often attended retreats and workshops at Tassajara, Green Gulch, and Spirit Rock. Her interest led her to become a lay Buddhist priest.

In her last years, Julie lived in Berkeley. She often attended concerts and visited museums with friends. She liked to take her grandchildren to the theater and became a surrogate grandmother to the next door family with young children. Before Covid she loved her water aerobics classes at the YMCA. Her house always had a stack of library books and music, sometimes slightly overdue. She could often be seen, pushing her walker around the neighborhood, sometimes as far as Trader Joes, where she loved wandering the aisles looking for new things to try.

Julie lived independently to the end. She is survived by all four of her children and her three grandchildren. She will be dearly missed.