

STEFANIE BRUNINGHAUS



Steffi Bruninghaus lived life to the fullest. She was born in Mannheim, Germany on September 2, 1966, and grew up in that region. She spent the summers of her youth in Ollsen, a village in Northern Germany, surrounded by family, nature, and horses. She often referred to these summer stays as the happiest times of her life. Her love and intuitive understanding of animals was honed during these formative years. She

became very skilled at dressage, with its close harmony between horse and human. She also was very good with dogs.

Following her studies at the University of Mannheim, Germany, Steffi moved to Pittsburgh in 1994 to pursue graduate studies in Intelligent Systems (Artificial Intelligence) at the University of Pittsburgh. Her research, guided by Kevin Ashley, focused on a still challenging problem: to make computers skilled at argumentation. In her hands, this tough nut began to crack! Although she eventually chose not to pursue a scientific career, she remained a scientist at heart and the work she did as a PhD student is still widely respected in international scientific research communities.

While at Pitt, she met her husband-to-be, Vincent Aleven, a graduate student in the same field. They married in 2004. They shared many passions, including classical music – they were avid visitors of the Pittsburgh Symphony – and backcountry hiking, with the Grand Canyon and Monongahela National Forest among their favorite destinations. Later, they would exchange their tent for the greater comfort of a log cabin, spending much time on the trails of Cook Forest, Pennsylvania.

Asked what she did in life, Steffi often said that her mission was to help her husband be successful. Yet she did so much more. She developed a passion for Middle Eastern dance and music. With her characteristic zeal, she immersed herself in the culture, often helping her friends and fellow students to sew costumes, learn choreography, and share the joy of dance. She was a founding member of Tribe Taksim, a local dance troupe with whom she performed frequently. Later, she developed the confidence to perform solo and delighted audiences with her passion and humor.

Spurred by a “walk-on cat” whom she welcomed into her house (“Skinny Cat”), she became very active in Pittsburgh’s animal shelter world, spending countless hours helping with a TNR program (trap, neuter, return) to help keep the city’s feral cat populations healthy. Many a time, she got up long before dawn to return cats that had been trapped and treated to their original city habitat. She was always immediately ready to help anyone who approached her with a cat problem. Meanwhile, she adopted many more cats into her house and developed close relations with many of them.

During the pandemic, she trained online to be a professional cat behaviorist. Steffi was known for her outspoken and eloquent advocacy of causes she believed in, including the humane treatment of animals, environmental causes, and keeping Frick Park (a gem of a park in Pittsburgh) wild and free of development. She embraced Pittsburgh as her second home, with cats taking on local names such as Parkway and Forbes, after the places where they were found.

She also became a passionate Steelers fan. Her love for the Steelers ended abruptly, however, when the Steelers signed a player with a history of flagrant animal abuse. She was at the stadium with protest signs.

Upon her grandmother Brigitte Bartsch’s passing several years ago, she inherited the family’s house in Ollsen. She had it beautifully renovated and foresaw spending much time there, together with her husband.

About two and a half years ago, she received the shocking news that she had breast cancer. She approached her battle with cancer with the same fire with which she once told her husband he should defend his scientific work: “like a lioness defends her kittens.” Very sadly, her battle came to an abrupt and much-too-early end on December 19, 2023. She passed in the presence of her very good friend, Kerri, and her husband. She still had many plans. She touched many lives and would have touched many more.

Shortly before her passing, she got to travel to Germany for a long-awaited reunion with her father. She spent a few very happy weeks in Ollsen, enjoying the newly renovated house and making many happy hikes in the woods she knew from her youth. She reconnected with her roots and the place where she was happiest.

She is survived by her father, Wolfgang Brüninghaus and her stepmother, Karin Kellenbenz, both of Wald Michelbach, Germany; her brother, Andreas Brüninghaus of Wiehl, Germany; and her husband of 19 years, Vincent Aleven of Pittsburgh.

The cremation has taken place. An event to celebrate Steffi’s life will be organized in January. Details will be announced. Her final resting place will be in Ollsen, Germany. Her energy, her wit, her intelligence, her compassion, and her embrace of life are already very sorely missed – and will remain so.

Arrangements entrusted to the **JOHN N. ELACHKO FUNERAL HOME**, 3447 Dawson St., Pgh., PA 15213. Please visit Stefanie’s memorial page at Elachko.com. In lieu of sending flowers, please consider making a donation to charities that fight for causes that Steffi strongly believed in: The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, Upstream Pittsburgh, Humane Animal Rescue, or Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

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