

ELIZABETH BELL MARTIN



Elizabeth "Betsy" Bell Martin, a Pittsburgh architect raised in the Depression and steeped in mid-century modernism who mothered four children while taking up any cause that crossed her path in a lifetime of scenic routes, extra stops and never-ending learning, has died. She was 98. Her health degenerated only toward the very end of her life before her death on April 13, 2024. Her longevity was surely owed in

part to her notorious thriftiness; full freezer of leftovers, her children surmised, must have boosted her immune system. But it was also her constant activity. For nearly a century, Betsy was an ever on-the-go woman - a swimmer, an old-house restorer, a perpetual French 101 student - who, much to the consternation of anyone who might be awaiting her arrival, did things at her own pace. Peter Martin, her youngest son, attributed Betsy's long life to her constantly being active and compared her to a shark. "When a shark stops moving, it dies," he said. "She's somebody who never wanted to not be productive," said Derek Martin, her middle son. "Not that she was always productive." "Whether it was a person, an organization or an idea, she was loyal to it," said her daughter Polly Coyle. "If you became her friend at six, you were still her friend at 96." Betsy, born in Pittsburgh on October 2, 1925, was the oldest of three, along with sister Marion V. Bell and William Wallace Bell III, who survives her. She was born to Alberta Graham Bell and William Wallace Bell Jr., who met at Iron City Fishing Club, the Georgian Bay, Ontario, camp founded by Pittsburgh families in the late 19th century. Iron City would remain central to Betsy for her entire life. She loved to recall her childhood memories of taking a sleeper train from Pittsburgh with her grandmother in an ICFC-dedicated car that would be diverted at Toronto for Midland. From there, a steamer ship would take them to Manitou Island. Those trips helped forge in Betsy a yearning for exploration that would persist, particularly later in regular excursions with Polly. Growing up in Rosslyn Farms outside Pittsburgh, other ambitions began stirring in her as well. For years she assembled a scrap book of her ideal house, filling it with drawings, color schemes and textures. "From the time I was in grade school, I wanted to be an architect," "Granna" told her great-granddaughter Marley Coyle in 2023. "I think it was because my mother loved to look at old houses. We'd drive all over the countryside finding old houses." Betsy graduated from the Madeira School in Virginia and later Wellesley College and then, at a time when few women did, got her architecture degree at Carnegie Tech, later renamed Carnegie Mellon. While there, her design for a single-level contemporary house won first prize from the National Association of American Home Builders. Also while there, she met Derek Martin, then a teaching assistant. The two wed in 1951, and went on to have four children - Polly, Derek, Peter and Andy, who died of cancer in 2017. Betsy's rows with young Andy at the dinner table were notorious, though there also wasn't anyone who made her laugh more. "You could tease her and she'd take it," said the younger Derek. "She'd be amused by it." While her husband established himself as an architect in Pittsburgh, Betsy kept up her own projects. Together, they built their own home - a single-level contemporary not so unlike her winning design - on a hillside in Rosslyn Farms. Inspired by the sleek architecture of Eero Saarinen and Walter Gropius, the modernist home was called a "painted cigar box" by some in the neighborhood. But the house, perched on stilts on one side and with a long bank of windows open to a bricked patio on the other, was woven organically into the land and exuded a warmth not always found in the style. Like Betsy, there was nothing quite like it. The Martins years later moved to a house in Crafton with adjacent offices. By then, Betsy had become involved with the Andrew Carnegie Free Library, where she was instrumental in its restoration. She was highly involved in preserving the John and Presley Neville House, a Pennsylvania colonial circa 1775. She was also active in gardening and local politics and the Unitarian Church. "She always wanted to be a New Age woman," said her son Derek. Derek, her husband, died in 1994. Though some people turn inward when they lose their spouse, Betsy turned outward. She never stopped taking classes - mostly with OSHER. She spoke to her best friend, Patty Steffey, daily. She watched PBS religiously. She liked a glass of port before lunch. She saved every receipt. She drove long past she ought to have. For her own enjoyment, she wrote two books, one on the history of Crafton and one on the history of The Andrew Carnegie Free Library. She disdained bad design and adored that which met her keen and abiding sense of taste. Betsy's long life enabled her to know her many grandchildren as adults. Her great-grandchildren could marvel at the 90-something-year-old woman who, on vacation in Canada, would still tune into radio broadcasts of political debates - and who was still trying to learn French. She was, profoundly, a busybody. She may have been expansively liberal-minded but she clung stubbornly to her ideals, filling her inquisitive, multi-tasking life with well-looked-after rituals. (One annual rite was pausing before a combination lock and wondering, "Now is it 'Toad' or 'Frog?'") That always made her laugh, just as so many things and people did. Always one to reach out to neighbors and new people - her friendships transcended generations. When asked what her greatest accomplishment was, a 97-year-old Betsy replied that it was her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Then she smiled and added: "But maybe I haven't done it yet." Betsy is survived by her brother Bill, her three children, 11 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to the ICFC Endowment Fund, c/o Brian Huber, 135 High Point Walk, Sandy Springs, GA 30342 or the Andrew Carnegie Free Library, 300 Beechwood Ave., Carnegie, PA 15106. A celebration of her life will be held at the Andrew Carnegie Free Library, 300 Beechwood Ave., Carnegie, PA on June 16, 2024, at 1:00 p.m. Arrangements entrusted to the **HERSBERGER-STOVER, INC. FUNERAL HOME & CREMATION SERVICES**, Crafton.

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