

KATHLEEN TARRANT

Kathleen Tarrant passes peacefully at 97.

Kathleen Tarrant, who like tens of millions of Americans was a child of early 20th century immigrants epitomizing assimilation into the American dream, died peacefully on Nov. 30th in Sun City Center, Florida. She was 97.

She had been taken earlier in the week to intensive care after respiratory failure and then to a hospice center, where she unexpectedly awoke and spent the rest of the day bantering with hospice staff and telling her children who had gathered from across the country, "We love you," using the royal we, because she was, indeed, the queen. Her last words were, "I'm tired". She fell asleep and passed away two days later.

In a family memoir, Kathleen describes growing up in Worcester, MA, in a struggling, working-class home during The Great Depression. She remembers the "kitchen rackets" the Irish community organized to welcome newcomers from the Emerald Isle. "The relatives of the newcomer invited all their friends. One room was stripped of its furniture and a fiddler and accordion player played fast Irish jigs, which some of the grownups, but most of the children danced to, while in the kitchen, women prepared mounds of ham sandwiches, cakes, Irish bread and coffee."

Kathleen was especially close to her father, Thomas O'Brien, who played the fiddle and sang at the rackets. She was devastated when he died in a work accident when she was 16. That meant Kathleen had to forego a college scholarship and her goal to become an Army nurse and instead go to work as an office clerk to help her mother care and put food on the table for the younger siblings.

She met her husband of 51 years when she was 19 at a dance at Worcester's Holy Cross College, which James J. Tarrant, also a child of Irish immigrants, was attending on the "GI Bill" after serving in the Navy during World War II. Two years later, after his graduation and their subsequent marriage in 1949, he took a job with Westinghouse at its headquarters in Pittsburgh in the new field of computer programming.

Kathleen recalled being filled with anxiety at moving away from her family to another state, an experience shared by so many newlyweds in the post-war American age of job mobility. She took a job in the "Steel City" with a commission charged with cleaning up pollution and driving Pittsburgh's "Renaissance." Her unflagging humor and social skills made her a favorite among the "Pa Pitt" commission's wealthy and staid members.

Kathleen would leave that job after the first of her six children were born. In 1960, the family moved to Squirrel Hill. She formed lifelong friendships with her Jewish neighbors, exemplifying to her children - now six of them - the values of tolerance and love for those of different ethnicity and religion.

By this time, her family was living a classic mid-century, middle-class life: home ownership in a residential neighborhood, station wagons, parochial schools for the children, seashore vacations with their Massachusetts relatives. It was a testament to the rapid assimilation of immigrants and the widespread upward mobility for many in post-war America.

After all six of Kathleen's children graduated from college, she and husband Jim retired to the planned retirement community of Sun City Center, FL, a popular option for members of the "Greatest Generation," many of whom had jobs that also uprooted them from where they grew up. Kathleen would be known as "the life of the party" in this last stop on their life's journey.

But she also endured painful losses at this point in her long life. Jim died in 2000, slumped in Kathleen's lap, after a massive stroke during a Friday night church dinner. Five years later, she married Jack Kirby, a Sun City resident from Wisconsin and converted Catholic, who died in 2014. Her youngest child and namesake, Kathleen Ann, of Orlando, Florida, died in 2017 at 53. Her oldest son, James Joseph Tarrant III, of Silver Spring, MD, died after a long illness in early 2023 at 73. Kathleen's innate optimism and resiliency helped her through the pain of these tragedies, attributes she carried to her deathbed.

In her later years, she mused about going back to Worcester to live out the remainder of her life. She never followed through on this dream. But she will be going back to her native Massachusetts; her ashes to be buried next to her beloved husband, Jim, in his hometown of Haverhill.

Kathleen Dorothy Tarrant is survived by her four remaining children, William, Margaret, David and Mary Susan; 11 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

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