

Obituary

Mary Lee Powell Burrus

1935-2020

Born on April 13, 1935, in McKinney, Texas, Mary Lee Powell Burrus (known as “Lou” to her family) was the daughter of Mary Joyce Hurt Powell and Clifton Lee Powell, and the older sister of Richard Michael (“Joe”) Powell. Raised in McKinney’s mill village in the embrace of a tight-knit extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, she was particularly close to her maternal grandmother, known as Mama Hurt. At age six Mary Lee started piano lessons, thanks to her mother’s determination that her daughter be able to fulfill her own thwarted ambitions, first, to play music and, second, to attend college. With a determination as fierce as her mother’s, balanced by a native confidence, Mary Lee became the pianist at her family’s Baptist church while still in elementary school. Both music and literature—the latter, along with education, one of her majors at Baylor University--would remain important to Mary Lee throughout her life. She became an accomplished pianist and was especially fond of Mozart. Later, having given up school teaching to care for her two children, she taught piano for many years; the grand piano was a fixture in the family’s living room. At eighty-five, she was still an active member of several serious literary book groups and always eager to talk with family and friends about what she was reading.

Also dating to her McKinney years was Mary Lee’s relationship with Sidney Burrus, whom she first met in seventh grade; she was wearing his football letter jacket a year later, and eventually, after a brief hiatus during college, they married in 1958. In sixty-two years of marriage, Mary Lee and Sidney, both notably independent spirits, raised two children, shared adventures and domestic life, and supported each other in their careers and other pursuits. Their first child, Virginia Burrus, was born in 1959 in Houston, where Sidney was in graduate school and Mary Lee was teaching; their second child, Charles Burrus, was born in 1961 in Connecticut, where Sidney was stationed in the Navy. They moved to California for three years while Sidney worked on his PhD, and by 1965 they were back in Houston, where they sank deep roots and remained for the rest of their lives, in a context shaped profoundly by Rice University and Covenant Church.

Mary Lee’s extraordinary gifts of hospitality supported Sidney and Mary Lee’s shared commitment to nurturing community life in many arenas and across decades, perhaps most notably in their five years as “magisters” of Lovett College at Rice. She was a wonderful cook and a witty conversationalist, and she dressed with flair and elegance. Her impressive organizational skills, intellectual acuity, articulateness, and adaptability also made her a valued contributor in countless contexts; a natural leader, she had a gift for gently bringing structure to any meeting she was in. Beginning a new chapter in her life after Gini and Charlie went to college, she forged successful and rewarding careers in the oil industry and the Rice development office. Always intellectually and socially engaged, she participated in movements for women’s rights and racial justice, and she served as chair of the deacons and in other leadership roles in Covenant Church; she also followed politics closely all her life and was pleased to have been able to vote for Joe Biden by absentee ballot shortly before her death.

Although strongly rooted in Houston, Mary Lee and Sidney shared a love of travel and were fortunate to have many rich experiences abroad. A year living in Germany and traveling extensively in Europe in 1975-76 was especially formative for the whole family. Mary Lee and Sidney had always loved Mexico and returned there with their children and their families for the celebration of their fiftieth wedding anniversary in 2008. Trips made with Sidney to China, Australia, and Africa also had an especially powerful impact on Mary Lee.

During their childhoods, Mary Lee invited each of her four grandchildren in turn to take special trips with her and Sidney. Grandparenting was one of the most cherished joys of her life. A patient and responsive listener, she considered it a great luxury to be able to spend time with each of her grandchildren, conversing with no particular agenda or responsibility, observing how their minds developed and being ready to offer perspectives different from either their parents' or their own.

Those same listening skills are part of what made Mary Lee such an effective leader—like her mother and grandmother, a natural matriarch, as Sidney puts it—and also such a good spouse, mother, grandmother, and friend. At family gatherings, she was famous for beginning meals by asking each person to tell the group how they were *really* doing; she truly wanted to know. She was tolerant and accepting, and also sharply insightful and opinionated—one of her many graceful balancing acts.

Mary Lee never stopped learning, reflecting, and growing; her life and loves remained works in progress, in the best and richest sense. In July of 2019, her family gathered around her for a reunion in New Braunfels, Texas. On that occasion, with characteristic directness, eloquence, and poise, Mary Lee addressed her grandchildren (with their parents listening in) on the topic of her own death. She wanted to prepare them as best she could, she said, and to that end she told them that, while she did not share traditional views of an afterlife, she was not afraid of death; rather, she felt open and curious about this final passage of life. A year later, when she knew her health was failing, she spoke with similar clarity and honesty about her choice to move to hospice care. She desired to die with as much grace as she had lived. On the evening of October 13, 2020, exactly six months after her eighty-fifth birthday, she departed life quietly in her home in the Brazos Towers retirement community in Houston.

The dignity, forthrightness, and decisiveness that Mary Lee demonstrated in these last conversations, characteristics she demonstrated throughout the many passages of her life's journey, are but part of the rich legacy she leaves her family and friends. She is celebrated and mourned especially by her husband of more than sixty-two years, Sidney Burrus; by her two children, Virginia Burrus and Charles Hendrix Burrus, and their spouses, Glenn Peers and Carol Hendrix Burrus; and by her four grandchildren, James Burrus Kelly, Mary Burrus Kelly, Evan Hendrix Burrus, and Claire Hendrix Burrus.

Donations may be made in Mary Lee's honor to Covenant Church (covenanthouston.org/giving) and the League of Women Voters (lww.org). For information about the virtual memorial service, please visit covenanthouston.org/in-memoriam.