

## Arlene Stepien - October 4, 2020



Arlene M. Stepien slipped quietly from this life on October 4th, 2020, surrounded by her family. Arlene was born in 1939, to Raymond and Lucy Stablewski. She was the first born of five children, with two younger brothers, Jack and Ken, and two younger sisters, Melanie and Sandy. Her childhood was spent in the working class Polish community of Cheektowaga, New York, just outside of Buffalo, where she danced to lots of Polkas, and developed her lifelong love of Polish food.

Arlene always had a thirst for knowledge, and as a young woman she was thrilled to win a partial college scholarship. The family's economic situation, however, necessitated she put the education she desperately wanted on hold, and she took a job as a stenographer for the New York State tax department. The sacrifice turned out to be fortuitous, as it was there that she met the love of her life, Richard, whom she was destined to spend the next 61 years with. They married on September 6, 1958, and three children followed in quick succession, Christian, Elaine and then Rick.

As the kids grew, Arlene strove to pass on her strong Catholic values, doing her best to accommodate their sometimes independent thinking. Winters in Tonawanda, New York, where they had built a modest new home, were cold and long, but the spring, summer and fall were delightful, and Arlene took to gardening, turning her small backyard into a cornucopia of fresh fruits and vegetables. She enjoyed making her own clothes from patterns and fabric, and cooked delicious meals every night for the family, who would gather around the table and begin each meal with a prayer.

Weekends would be spent with her and Richard's extended families, eating, watching football, and simply enjoying each other, interspersed with trips to Niagara Falls and the Lake Erie beaches. It was the summer vacations to Canada and the Adirondacks, though, where she became enchanted with crystalline mountain lake waters and the thick smell of pine and hemlock. When she and Richard discovered a unique Adirondack camp run by the White Fathers missionaries on lake Kushuqua, they found a perfect combination of spirituality, community, and nature, and it became the family's go to destination for years. She loved to fish, and the family enjoyed feasts of fresh caught perch, as well as clams dug out of the sandy lake bottoms.

When the kids went off to college, Arlene became a hospice volunteer, and then, as she said in her own words, "I decided to see if my brain still worked". So, at the age of 40, she enrolled in the nursing program at the State University of New York. Again in her own words: "Not only did my brain work, it worked well", and she continued on to receive a Master's degree with a specialty in oncology nursing and another partial master's degree in psychiatric nursing. She put all that education to work as a palliative care nurse and also at Roswell Park Memorial Hospital, a large cancer research hospital in Buffalo. Concurrently, she began teaching in the nursing program at Genesee Community College.

Throughout all of this, Richard had been working at the Internal Revenue Service, and when he reached 30 years of service, a unique opportunity presented itself with a job offer in St. Croix, in the U.S. Virgin Islands. He and Arlene summoned up their courage, packed up their life, and moved to the Caribbean, where they found a vibrant new culture and great new friends. Arlene resumed work as a nurse and educator, and led the formation of St. Croix unit of the American Cancer Society. Originally planning to stay only a year, they eventually found themselves there for ten. They bought a condo on the beach, and settled into the rhythms of the trade winds, deeply enjoying paradise.

The islands, however, also had their frightening side. They were hit by 4 hurricanes, the worst of which was Hugo, which devastated the island, cut them completely off from communications with their family for months, and took a deep psychological toll that eventually led them to return to the mainland.



Now 100% retired, and free from any responsibilities, Arlene and Richard purchased a pickup truck and a 30 foot fifth wheel trailer, and ventured out to explore the vast expanses of the United States that they had never seen. They stayed on the road for 2 years, then decided to settle back down in central Florida, where to the delight of their six grandchildren, who they dearly loved, they took part time jobs at Disney World helping shepherd newly arrived guests to their Disney cruises. They soon discovered it was more fun to actually be on the cruises, and over subsequent years they booked adventures exploring the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, and the Pacific from Mexico through Alaska. As the years went by, and the world around them continued to speed up, their own lives began to slow down, and travel became less frequent.

They moved north to be closer to their children, and then, in September 2018, just days before their 60th anniversary, Richard passed away. Arlene's final move was to a Senior living facility near her daughter in Yorktown, Virginia, where to the very end of her life she continued to form deep new friendships, and was truly loved by the staff that cared for her.

Arlene is survived by her children, Christian Stepien and his wife Melissa, Elaine Dials and her husband David, and Rick Stepien and his wife Peggy, six grandchildren (Katie Nunez, Chelsea Lavell, Colleen Lavell, Rick Stepien, Christopher Stepien, and Patrick Stepien), a step-grandchild (Latimer Smith) two great-grandchildren (Char and Aria Stepien) and two step-great-grandchildren (Reed and Emery Smith). All will miss her deeply.

A Funeral Mass will be held at St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church, 315 Harris Grove Lane, Yorktown, VA, on Saturday, October 24th, at 2 PM. In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to the University of Notre Dame for the Stepien Scholarship Fund, and mailed to Donor Services, University of Notre Dame, 1100 Grace Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556 or via the internet at [https://give.to.nd.edu/give?fund\\_id=1368](https://give.to.nd.edu/give?fund_id=1368). Arrangements by C. MERTZ AND SON FUNERAL HOME, INC. Please share condolences at [www.mertzfh.com](http://www.mertzfh.com)