



Patricia Ann Messbarger

July 7, 1935 - May 14, 2022

Patricia Ann Messbarger (née Graham), who taught history in Catholic high schools for more than 55 years with an emphasis on politics and women's rights, died May 14 at her Chicago home. She was 86.

Pat's career took her to five cities in just as many midwestern states while she supported her academic husband and raised six children. Somehow, she did all this while looking effortlessly chic with an always fashionable haircut and proudly on a budget to boot. The last 33 years of her teaching career were spent at St. Ignatius College Prep in Chicago which were among the most fulfilling that she spent in the profession.

Born in Hays, Kansas on July 7, 1935, and raised in Council Grove, Pat was the second of four children to Charles and Margaret Graham (née Sinclair). Her siblings included two brothers, Thomas and John, and her sister Judy (Rachel). She was the beauty of the family and grew up to attend a four-year college, Mount St. Scholastica—a Catholic women's college in Atchison. There she developed a keen awareness of the importance of women's education and empowerment that would animate her teaching philosophy through life along with a wry sense of humor and a keen wit.

Pat and her siblings attended a one-room schoolhouse for grades one through eight. She said that the world of a smalltown childhood depicted in *To Kill a*

Mockingbird was a little like her own. She liked to tell the story of how the school abutted a compound holding German prisoners of war engaged in building a nearby dam. The Second World War was raging at the time, but Pat best remembers the civility of the prisoners as they recreated side by side, separated by the barbed wire fence penning the men inside. When a ball flew into the adjoining play space, the kids would throw it back to the prisoners, who returned the favor when balls from the schoolyard landed in their area.

Her interest in politics was evident in high school where she was on the debate team. She graduated from high school a year early.

College brought her to influences that would shape her outlook for the rest of her life. She met a circle of lifelong friends, including her college roommate Lillis Ling who introduced herself on move-in day by announcing “I’m Lillis-like-Phyllis!”

She also met Paul Messbarger, her future husband—a varsity football player at the brother college St. Benedict’s School (later Benedictine) and the editor of the college poetry journal. Paul had a strong interest in literature and a future as a gifted university teacher. Life in college was grand. Pat’s first drink in a bar of legal drinking age was a “pink squirrel.” She adored Audrey Hepburn and sparkling film comedies such as *The Reluctant Debutante* with Sandra Dee. She also loved Doris Day movies even though Paul was not a Doris Day fan. Pat graduated from Mount St. Scholastic with a BA in English.

Paul and Pat (“Patsy” to Paul) would marry in 1959 while she was in her first teaching job at Bishop Ward High School in Kansas City, KS. The kids at Ward were among the cleverest she ever taught despite being disadvantaged and labeled remedial by the school. They brought a bag of cash to her wedding as a present. Paul and Patsy honeymooned at the Linger Longer Inn on their way to Seattle and saw Harry Belafonte in concert. No sooner were

they in the throes of marital bliss then Paul's draft number was called, and he was stationed for a year in Korea.

Paul and Pat's children—including Rebecca, Rachel, Anne, Paula, and Jessica (Jake)— were born as she followed her graduate student husband through the vagaries of an uncertain academic career and a commitment to anti-war activism during the turbulent Vietnam era. When Paul signed on to the faculty at Marquette in Milwaukee in the mid-60s, she noticed that its English Department had but one woman among its 25 professors. Years later as she and Paul were being honored by their alma mater, she mentioned that as well as her own good fortune in being educated by powerful, generous, and intellectual women back in the early '50s at her then separate women's college. Then she referred to her five daughters, saying, "How glad I am that the power of women was in mother's milk."

After Paul's career took them from Iowa to Indiana to Minnesota and Wisconsin they finally landed permanently in Chicago where Paul was made a tenured professor of English at Loyola University. They lived in a cozy house on Glenlake Avenue in the Edgewater neighborhood and found a place within the lively and tight knit community of St. Gertrude's Parish. This was the late 1970's and Pat was going for a Cher look. The family loved The Mary Tyler Moore Show, and Bob Newhart, and M*A*S*H* and Saturday Night Live, and the music of Carol King, Cher, Peter, Paul & Mary, and Simon & Garfunkel. Family vacations were legendary car trips and included a visit to Washington DC for Jimmy Carter's inauguration in 1977 and the less exotic, but family favorite, Cranberry Island. Pat earned a master's degree in history from Northeastern University while teaching fulltime and pregnant with her sixth child, Matthew. She still adored Audrey Hepburn.

The Messbargers acclimated to life in a big city. And the more Pat taught in

urban environments, the more she understood the social upheavals and inequities wracking the nation. She began getting more and more topical in her teaching. She was sensitive to students most in need and kept a sharp eye out for the misfit and the bullied. She considered herself a Commonweal Catholic in her outlook with her shared passion with Paul for social justice. She was a proud, lifelong Democrat and fellow traveler in many respects with the second wave feminist movement.

Pat started teaching at St. Ignatius in 1979, the year it went coed. She taught Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* and Gandhi's autobiography and AP history, and prepared kids for life after graduation. She understood how vulnerable kids were at the age where they were about to start over having just conquered high school and imparted practical wisdom on how to handle it.

With all but one of their kids off to college by 1987, Paul and Pat traded their Edgewater bungalow for a beautiful lakefront condo in Rogers Park. Pat was sporting a very au-currant a-symmetrical haircut by now and set to work creating a beautifully furnished and designed space for them to grow old in, even if they still had one kid hanging around by then, Matt.

Paul and Pat didn't settle into a staid groove for very long. Just over a year after moving to Rogers Park they moved to Rome, Italy for a year where Paul taught at Loyola's Rome Center campus and Pat tried to see what life was like as a temporary American ex-pat who didn't work for a living. She wasn't terribly impressed and was ready to get back to life in Chicago, her lakefront apartment, and teaching presto.

Paul and Pat's first grandchild was born in 1995 (Julian Graham Fiorello) but 11 more would follow. Pat insisted on being called "Grammie," not "Grandma," and wanted to model her role as being the Auntie Mame of her grandchildren's lives. She proudly kept a single toy for them (referred to as

“the toy”) on hand for when they came over.

Paul and Pat had a life rich in friendship including dear friends in Chicago from the worlds of Glenlake and St. Gertrude's, Loyola, and St. Ignatius, as well as the friends they made along the way from college. Dinner parties at their condo in Rogers Park were great fun. As the 1990s rolled on Pat followed Bill and Hillary Clinton's rise with great interest. She was even game for seeing edgier movies at their local theater with Paul such as Pulp Fiction and Trainspotting. She relished scandalizing the Ignatius faculty lunchroom by telling her colleagues she had seen Fight Club the night before. She was more of a Julia Roberts fan at this point though.

Paul and Pat were enormously fond of Fr. William J. Kenneally, the pastor of St. Gertrude's, for his progressive activism, jovial spirit, and southside Irish charm. Pat always maintained that Kenneally had “a little (David) Letterman in him.”

As their kids married off and the grandkids were born Paul and Pat started to get a taste of what life in retirement would be like and it was sweet. They took a trip on the QE2 to England. They spent a few winters in San Antonio with their kids Jessica and Anne nearby. They went to Jerusalem on a package tour and made new friends who dropped in for cocktail parties back in Chicago.

Paul died in 2003 and his death broke Pat's heart. She soldiered on without him teaching and presiding as matriarch over an ever-growing family for another 19 years. She and Rachel looking out for and taking care of each other throughout the years. She retired from teaching in 2012 and moved into the Edgewater Beach Apartments, an elegant and historic building on Chicago's north side. With the help of her beloved longtime local hairstylist, Joey, she let her hair go grey finally and it still looked amazing. She was

thrilled by the political rise of the Black community organizer from Chicago becoming president, Barack Obama, and was happy that marriage equality became the law of the land granting her son and his husband equal rights before the law. By the time of 45's rise, the Messbargers thought maybe there was an upside to Pat's memory starting to fade, for her sake. While still a loyal friend and loving and devoted mother and "Grammie" as well as an avid New York Times and Vanity Fair reader among countless other magazines and books, she never was quite the same.

The bond she had with Paul so strong that its untimely severing was a burden too great to bear and she stopped looking forward as much as she used to. Throughout her remaining years, and even in the throes of the dementia that eventually claimed her, she never quite lost her sharp sense of humor, her incredible beauty and style; and her habit of calling anything she liked "fabulous."

The family remains unsure of who she meant to gift her cherished fur coat to as many of us had been promised it over the years for various favors rendered. She remained a fan of Audrey Hepburn for life.

Pat is preceded in death by her parents Charles and Margaret and her brothers Thomas and John, sister Judy (Rachel), and husband Paul. She is survived by her six children Rebecca (husband, Sam Fiorello); Rachel, Anne (husband, Tony Eguia); Paula (husband, Dave Connolly); Jessica (husband, DJ Gracia); and Matthew (husband, Joseph O'Neill) and her 12 grandchildren including Julian, Maxwell, and Audrey Fiorello; Olivia, Charlie and Paul Eguia; Coleman, Seamus, and Finn Connolly; and Austin, Anna, and Lauren Gracia.

The family would like to give special thanks to Natalia Mendela, Pat's devoted caretaker and friend, whose love, friendship, and dedication made our mother's final years ones of comfort and security.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to Friedman Place—a supportive living community for adults who are blind. <http://friedmanplace.org/>

Previous Events

Memorial Mass

JUL **23**. 10:00 AM (CT)

St Gertrude Catholic Church
1420 W Granville Ave
Chicago, IL 60660
(773) 764-3621

Tribute Wall



“ *Barr Funeral Home created a Patricia Messbarger Funeral Livestream in memory of Patricia Ann Messbarger*



Barr Funeral Home - July 22, 2022 at 04:58 PM



“ *Patricia Ann Messbarger*

October 08, 2023 at 11:31 AM



“ *My memories of my Mount classmate, Pat, are warm and lasting. I am very glad to have had her in my life. Janelle Knoedel Lazzo*

Janelle Lazzo - July 22, 2022 at 09:48 PM



“ *Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum was purchased for the family of Patricia Ann Messbarger.*



July 21, 2022 at 04:51 PM

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“ As a young child I remember your parents wedding, The reception was held at the top of this business building at a private club in Kansas City, Kansas. Our mother Loretta, Pauls sister so loved a party, she invited all those attending the reception to our home. So the party continued & guests were even sleeping on our front lawn from all the celebrating.
Our mom loved visiting the Chicago home & spending time with you all. Your parents were very loved and we send our condolences.
Hager Family

Stephanie - May 20, 2022 at 03:02 PM

PS

“ My condolences to the Messbarger family. I had the privilege of taking two elective history courses with Mrs. Messbarger during my senior year at SICP. I remember lively class discussions and creative, "outside the box" writing assignments which required us to really engage with the material we were learning.

Mrs. Messbarger was an educator in the truest sense of that word. Her passion for teaching and for engaging her students in learning was obvious, even to a high school senior! She undoubtedly touched thousands of lives throughout her teaching career and taught us to be creative, critical thinkers.

My prayers are with all of you as you celebrate her life and gifts.

Paul Semisch, SICP '88

Paul Semisch - May 18, 2022 at 08:23 AM



“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Jake Gracia - May 17, 2022 at 08:19 PM