

'We know that her legacy will live on.' Naples philanthropist Lavern Norris Gaynor gave to community

Harriet Howard Heithaus - Naples Daily News



A Naples life: Lavern Norris Gaynor dies at 97

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Most people would call installing a camera on the Naples Pier a brilliant marketing tool, luring 2 million annual visits to its panorama of billowing surf, wood-planked jetty and pearly beaches.

But Lavern Norris Gaynor, driving force behind putting the pier online, had a different motivation.

She wanted to bring that view into the homes of the aging Naples population who could no longer walk their city pier. They could glimpse the waves, see the happy beachgoers and watch the sunset from their wheelchairs or sickbeds.

Gaynor, who died April 12, at age 97, had that kind of mind and heart, said Judy Bishop, director of Naples Backyard History.

"I have never met a more giving, caring kind person in my life. And it's not because she's given a lot of money, even though she has supported causes generously. She lives it. She's been very conscientious in everything she supports," said Bishop, who met the woman everyone knew as Lal, 12 years ago.

Gaynor, founder of the historical organization, was looking for an executive director, and Bishop offered to do it voluntarily for six months.

"It got to be a joke," Bishop said. "I would tell her, 'This seems like an awfully long six months!' "

Lavern Norris Gaynor was this city's best friend

Gaynor leaves behind shelves of awards: Naples Daily News Citizen of the Year, Outstanding Philanthropist in 2015 and the YMCA's Preeminent Pioneer — twice. A Golden Gate school bears her name, Lavern Gaynor Elementary; its sea turtle mascot recalls a favorite family cause, conservation.

But more important to Lal Gaynor was that the work she supported was helping Naples: better educating its children, preserving its nature, conserving its heritage. Lal Gaynor was this city's best friend.

"Right from beginning, when we were founded about 31 years ago, she started to get to know us through our Golden Apple awards for teachers," said Susan McManus of the Champions for Learning Foundation. "She was very interested in helping families give their children the ability to get an education, especially for those parents who didn't speak English.

"She raised her children in Europe, so she knew what it was like to send your kids off to school and not speak the language."



Students from the Naples elementary school named for Lavern Gaynor made cards to present to her for her birthday in December.

Gaynor provided scholarships for the programs, attended meetings and supported projects such as Connect Now, an effort to get input from and explain the schools' vision to parents in every zip code of Collier County. Just having her name attached to an organization gave it credibility, McManus said.

"If Lal was behind it and supporting it, people wanted to be part of it," she added.

"I cannot picture Collier County being without her."

To celebrate Gaynor's 97th birthday, staff from her school formed a car parade in front of her home, dropping off baskets of cards made by the students. It was a delight to Gaynor, McManus recalled — especially when Naples police, who had been directing traffic, pulled out their bullhorns and sang "Happy Birthday" to her.

"She had a love of nature that went on forever. She would rather be in anyone's garden than in their home," said Lois Selfon, a friend who, with her husband, Bruce, regularly invited Gaynor to outdoor gatherings at their Old Naples home.

Gaynor, she said, would always look for a seat in the garden she could enjoy the foliage as well as the conversation.

Former Naples Mayor Bill Barnett knew Lal Gaynor from his first years as a city councilman in 1984.

"If she liked something you presented, she was 100 percent in. She was even gracious when she didn't want to do something," he said. "When she explained why she wasn't in favor of it you always felt like there might have been something better on the horizon to her.

"She was a genuinely classy human being."

He recalled the only time he had encountered Gaynor upset: when the Pier cam she had championed lost view of the fireworks boat that was about to set off a holiday show. The boat had to move to set off the fireworks, and she wanted the camera to move, too, so people watching at home in Naples — and potentially, around the world — could see them.

"You just couldn't move that camera, but somehow we did it," he said. "Whatever she needed, we were going to do for her."

Like many of the most loving children, Lavern Gaynor was an adoptee of Naples. She was born in St. Charles, Illinois, the daughter of an heiress to the Texaco fortune and her husband, a one-time cartoonist for the Chicago Tribune. She learned her devotion for philanthropy from her mother, who insisted she give the 20 pennies she had earned from presenting a neighborhood play to the children of a nearby orphanage.

"That was the way we were brought up," she said in a 2018 interview. "We had to be kind to other people, to think about other people."

The family moved to Naples in 1945 when Lavern Norris' parents bought what was then the Keewaydin Club on Key Island, and added five miles of surrounding land to preserve the island. Her parents became established in what was then a community known for its fishing, family beaches and small-town atmosphere.

But within a year, their daughter, who had already graduated from Northwestern University, had moved away to marry Texaco executive George Gaynor, and they moved from New York to Belgium, where they lived for 14 years, and Italy. Their son and daughter, George and DeeDee, grew up there, and their mother, who had briefly taught in South Chicago, could compare firsthand the differences between American and European education. It would become an important cause for her in Naples.

Todd Turrell, the ocean engineer who worked with Gaynor on her parents' club at Keewaydin, remembered her stories of life abroad and the two swapped travel stories.

"Mrs. G, as I called her, worried about me flying around the Caribbean in my prop plane to work, but loved to hear the stories when I came back. When she was a young mother in the days before jet aircraft, a prop plane she and her children were passengers on lost two of its four engines over the Atlantic Ocean en route to Europe. She was worried about her son, who was already in his life jacket, but was otherwise calm," he recalled her narrative. "What could I do about it, after all," she told him.

"Who has stories like that?" he said.

Turrell also recalled her love for history, and her enthusiastic support, raising funds for archeological digs and carbon dating, for the excavation of an Indian canal in Old Naples. (A sign at Third and Broad streets marks the area today.)

"She worked endlessly to enhance the Naples we know today and helped preserve our history for future generations to enjoy," he said in a written tribute.

Gaynor's legacy in Naples

Mrs. Gaynor's work in Naples came after her retirement, when she and her husband moved to the community her parents had embraced.

Dellora and Lester Norris had left a legacy of place, rebuilding the pier after Hurricane Donna in 1960, and contributing substantially to the building of the original Naples Community Hospital, Norris Center at Cambier Park and the Lowdermilk Park pavilion. They contributed toward the founding both Rookery Bay and what is now The Conservancy of Southwest Florida. They bought the land for Delnor-Wiggins State Park, which combines both her mother first name, Dellora, and her father's last name, Norris, in the title.

Lal Gaynor invested in people. She was behind countless scholarships for children from disadvantaged homes and for graduating students who were at Youth Haven. She did it quietly, said McManus, "but she was always right there, making sure we had the funding."

The Gaynors contributed to the development of Hodges University, after it was founded in a shopping center strip mall. After her husband's death, Gaynor presented International College with an endowed gift to establish a President's Chair.

Among her contributions was one to cover, along with the John Remington family, 30 years of Outward Bound courses to be distributed among Collier County students and teachers.

Remington, who built both house Gaynor lived in here, pointed out that she quietly funded the YMCA Childrens Center, and she and her sister were the lead gift donors to the swimming pool adjacent to The Community School of Naples, which was open to all the county high schools.

Remington said that after his own mother died, he told Mrs. Gaynor she was his adopted mom; similarly, Turrell said her told her she was his Naples mother. She had all the qualities you would want in a mother Remington said: "She was always a delight, and always an optimist."

In a statement, Kamela Patton, superintendent of Collier County Public Schools, said the district was saddened to hear of the loss, describing Gaynor as someone "who gave generously to support education in Collier County."

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The family will hold a celebration of life for Lavern Norris Gaynor, with details to be announced later.

Naples Daily News education reporter Rachel Fradette contributed to this report.

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