



Mary S. Watkins

December 17, 1942 - October 31, 2024

Mary S. Watkins

(continued from the KC Star, Nov 3)

Mary S. Watkins was born in Springfield, Missouri a week before Christmas in 1942. She is the second of five kids who grew up close and remained so. Mary attended parochial schools including one year at Fontbonne College. In 1964 she graduated with a BA in Education and a minor in math from the University of Missouri.

In August after graduating, she married Curt Watkins whom she'd met while playing basketball years prior when they were both fourteen. They married the summer after graduating from college and settled in Kansas City where Mary began teaching elementary school. They welcomed their first child "Tuc" in 1966. Having lived mostly in Kansas City, the family had three interludes in other places. The first being in Haddonfield, New Jersey where her daughter Courtney was born in 1968. With Curt traveling the east coast, Mary moved the crew to East

Wallingford, Vermont to get into nature. It was a very rustic and happy year taking her kids on hikes, splashing in rivers, picking blueberries, and hauling drinking water pumped from the spring in a nearby park. The third short departure was in 1982 to St. Louis. There, she continued with her photography work including projects with (Joan) Marsh Film Enterprises, wrote another book, and taught at Webster University. After both kids graduated high school, Mary and Curt moved back to Kansas City in 1986 where they've always felt at home.

More about Mary's work in education and as a photographer

While teaching, she knew there was a better way to engage children beyond the rote techniques- what she called "sit and get." Mary had a keen instinct for what would later be dubbed experiential learning. She immersed herself in learning everything she could about this approach and sharpening her innate skills. Reading, observing, engaging in conversations with other energized teachers, and participating in her children's Montessori education, this was the start of Mary's mission to change education both for students and teachers alike.

While on the east coast, she volunteered as a buyer for Cooper Hospital auxiliary in the very tough town of Camden. In retrospect, she would say, this experience was the genesis for

understanding the fragility of different populations. Her passion for changing lives through more thoughtful education increased. She felt more relevant, thought-filled, hands-on education could improve circumstances and make a difference for future outcomes. A line from "Born to Win" served as a succinct guide for Mary as she trail blazed new pathways in education: "If you touch me soft and gentle, If you look at me and smile at me, If you listen to me talk sometimes before you talk, I will grow, really grow." She moved forward with the idea that a caring and nurturing early education could assure better lives. Approaching children with respect for them as individuals, a change could result in positive future outcomes.

She joined The Junior League circa 1971 and helped with communications and PR. She began using her camera more for communications. It was at about this time that she reconnected with a third grade teacher colleague and the conversations began that led to their co-founding The Learning Exchange. The two women were driven, moving in and out of spaces shared with Grace and Holy for weekday classes and tearing down the sets each week for Church. They practiced the "art of the ask" on their husbands and quickly were out raising money in the community. Mary's attire for such meetings included a small clipboard

necklace to which she attached a piece of paper displaying “\$\$\$” to assure her target remained focused.

In 1987, Mary moved back to Kansas City from St. Louis. She was happy to be back in the town she has enjoyed and advocated for her entire adult life. Her next neighborhood was in midtown’s Roanoke. She celebrated her new neighborhood by conceiving and executing the re-forestation of Roanoke’s parkways with the planting of 141 trees that now grace the sidewalks of Roanoke. Mary volunteered documenting photography of nearby resident’s reclamation of Roanoke Park. The park had suffered fifty years of neglect. Her family support and documentation of early and on going work helped make the case with Kansas City Parks and Recreation for a public-private enterprise that led to the formation of The Roanoke Park Conservancy and almost one million dollars in improvements to transform this historic Kessler park into the 38-acre midtown jewel that now laces, rather than demarcates, three adjacent neighborhoods together. Mary indeed made a few pictures worth thousands of words... and dollars.

Well into her photography career, Mary began to donate her services or substantially reduce fees to the agencies that helped the plights that she had first found so

poignant in Camden.

She enjoyed years of work and friendship with Crittenden Center, Women's Network, Women's Foundation, Rose Brooks, CCVI, Journey to Life and similar organizations.

Mary enjoyed the later years of her photography career as she began photographing the next generation and seeing family resemblances. Many family portraits in homes throughout Kansas City were taken by her. She became a popular photographer among high school seniors for their "Senior Portraits." First taking the expected photo to please the student's parents, and then urging them to flout tradition and show their personality.

Mary was commissioned by the law firm Stinson Mag to photograph courthouses throughout Missouri. It took forever to complete the job because Mary liked to chat, at length, with the people who invariably hung around the courthouse grounds. Mary called them the "keepers of the courthouse," and she gathered many stories about the history of each.

After retiring, her entire body of work went in 42 boxes at the request of UMKC to be archived.

Mary connected with people and animals alike. She and her first Border Collie, Dakotah, had an uncanny connection. Dakotah couldn't go in the stores Mary frequented, but she would remain outside the door staring intently at everyone exiting, waiting for Mary. "Dakotah Cards"

became a popular line of greeting cards Mary created.

With the births of her three grandchildren, Mary became "M.E." (for Mary Elizabeth) and forged special friendships with them with her famous chocolate chip cookies that had just the right crunch.

In retrospect Mary began to change in 2016. Dr. Jeff Burns diagnosed her with MCI in 2019.

Mary didn't say much about it, but carried on. As the layers peeled away, her core of

sweetness continued to glow. Remarkably, as everyone else became "sweetie" she still called

her family members by name. Five weeks before her death, Curt brought her home from the

memory support facility. It felt so right to have her home for her final days.

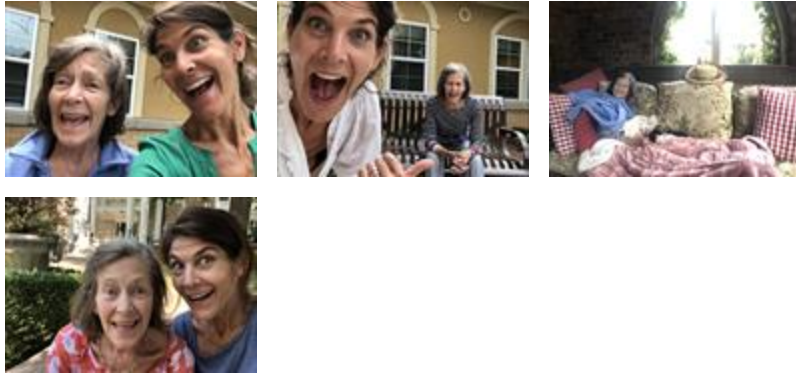
Damn this disease.

We miss you, Mary Watkins.

Tribute Wall

CW

“ 4 files added to the tribute wall



Courtney Watkins - November 04, 2024 at 07:12 PM

CW

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Courtney Watkins - November 04, 2024 at 07:09 PM

LA

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Lucia Amsden - November 04, 2024 at 12:28 PM

LA

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Lucia Amsden - November 04, 2024 at 11:58 AM

CW

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Courtney Watkins - November 03, 2024 at 09:55 AM

CW

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Courtney Watkins - November 03, 2024 at 09:54 AM

CW

“ 3 files added to the tribute wall



Courtney Watkins - November 03, 2024 at 09:23 AM