



## Debra Ann Bailey

November 2, 1950 - April 27, 2020

Debra Ann Bailey, 69, born November 2, 1950 passed away April 27, 2020, due to complications from cancer. She was preceded in death by her father, John Sr., and is survived by her mother Esther, daughter Alix Bailey; grandchildren Liam and Emma; siblings John Bailey Jr. (Cindy), Denise Bailey Thorne (Kurt), Pamela Lovesy (Thomas); nephews John III and Jacob; niece Caitlin, her special reading buddy and niece Sara, and the “world’s best friends.”

Deb was a Grand Rapidian and proud of her “west-sider” upbringing. She graduated from West Catholic High School and stayed here to attend Grand Rapids Community College. She continued her education in West Michigan earning a degree in English, communications and education and a masters in counseling all from Western Michigan University and then a master’s in management from Aquinas College.

After a multi-year teaching stint in Kuwait, a country she admitted she didn’t know existed at the time, Deb returned to Grand Rapids and began her extraordinary career working for the Women’s Resource Center, Haworth, Herman Miller, Aquinas College and capping it off with 19 years at Steelcase, her final post, as Director of Corporate Global Relations.

As impressive as her positions at these companies are and the immense value of her contributions there, her biggest impact was in the greater Grand Rapids community through serving on a multitude of boards and in other ways helping various organizations, including Aquinas College, the Dominican Sisters ~ Grand Rapids, Gilda’s Club, Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce, Grand Rapids Community College, Grand Rapids Student Advancement Foundation, Hospice of Michigan, Junior League of Grand Rapids, Saint Mary’s Foundation, and the YWCA-West Central Michigan. In recognition of her numerous and significant contributions to the community, Deb received a number of awards including the YWCA Tribute Award for Community Service, the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce Athena Award, the Michigan Women’s Forward Woman of Achievement and Courage Award, the Veritas Award from West Catholic High School, West Michigan Woman’s Valiant Victor Award, Herman Miller’s Outstanding Employee

Award, and the Aquinas College Outstanding Alumni Award. She was also named one of The Grand Rapids Business Journal's 25 Most Influential Women in West Michigan.

Deb was a gifted “connector” and generous mentor to many young women starting off in their careers but also to those working their way toward leadership roles and “taking over for us,” Deb would say. She was a prodigious fundraiser for the many organizations she supported and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars on their behalf. She often chaired or served on various capital campaigns to the eternal gratitude of the organizations' boards and executive directors. She saw her community commitments as a way of connecting like-minded people and she found value in fueling collaboration. “Let me make a few calls,” she would say and the ball got rolling.

Deb was first diagnosed with cancer 28 years ago and diagnosed again four additional times. She would say that she was a five time cancer survivor and then quip that she was an “over-achiever.” Far from making her sour or prompting self-pity, her experience with cancer gave her a deep compassion for others and motivated her to do all that she could to make that cancer journey more tolerable for others. Her experience prompted this advice – to pay attention to how you handle your losses as it reveals much more about yourself than your successes. It certainly revealed Deb's heart and provided the motivation for her to join with two other cancer survivors to found Gilda's Club in Grand Rapids. Among so many accomplishments this was the one she was most proud of. She wanted to create a place that provided free emotional support to the children, family and friends of those affected by cancer.

Though celebrated and awarded in her professional and community life, her truest joy came from being a mother to her daughter, Alix, and Nana to her grandchildren Liam and Emma. Deb had legions of friends – many of whom claimed “best friend” status and for good reason; to them she was the best friend. A prodigious reader and raconteur she also enjoyed crafts, was a talented seamstress, canner of variety jams and the one person who had to attend one's party as the fun would be immeasurably added by her presence. She will be remembered as a leader, mentor, life coach, advocate, mother, daughter, sister, nana and friend to so very many, whose lives are greatly diminished with her passing. Services are pending. Deb's wishes were for people to make a donation to their charity of choice.