



Kathryn P. Mitchell

SEP 17, 1927 - NOV 7, 2023



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Kathryn “Polly” Phelps Mitchell was born on September 17, 1927 to Eugene and Ella Phelps in Merry Hill, North Carolina. She was one of seven siblings that began their lives in the Dismal Swamp. She lived a long and large life of 96 years, passing from this earth and into the hands of God on November 7, 2023.

Mom loved her family and childhood, and went to grades 1-11 at the single room Merry Hill School in Bertie County, N.C. Because she was a good student and had always wanted to be a nurse, the family physician sponsored her for a scholarship to East Carolina Technical College (now East Carolina University).

Polly graduated with honors and was then accepted into the Duke University School of Nursing. While there, she met Charlie Mitchell, a student at (gasp) the University of North Carolina. It was love at first sight, and they were married on November 7, 1947. They were absolutely inseparable during their 72 years together. Yes, mom died on their 76th anniversary.

Upon graduation from Duke, she attended the Watts School of Nursing —created by the Army Cadet Nurse Corps to teach and train more nurses back home because so many had been going overseas during and after WWII. There she found her calling as a nursing instructor.

She got a scholarship to go to UNC in the School of Public Health Nursing, and after graduation, Polly was hired by the Durham County Health Department. There was a polio pandemic in 1947, so she went to work on polio vaccinations. That’s when she became immersed in public health and found her calling. And she always believed in vaccinations.

She was hired briefly by the American Cancer Society, but, despite her best efforts, they would not acknowledge smoking as a public health issue at that time in tobacco-dependent North Carolina. So, she quit and went back to teaching public health nursing.



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Mom was a brilliant and inspiring teacher, but a tough and demanding taskmaster. No one knew that better than her sons. We, like all of mom's students, loved her and respected her because, of course, she was usually right.

Mom was more organized than Marie Kondo and had high expectations for us. She was hard on us, but we always felt her relentless love and devotion. She taught us to be kind, polite, and to care about others. We were not easy to mold into the good men she expected us to be. We're still working on that, Mom.

Her steadfast determination to do things well ("or not at all") became more than a good example—it was an inspiration. As was Mom's whole life. She spent most of it wading into others' chaos to help them, or teaching others how to do so. She was determined to improve the world by improving public health, and she worked her whole life to that end.

She had visions of joining the World Health Organization, and because she graduated with honors at the top of her class, had an offer from them to go overseas. But then she met Dad while playing tennis, and that changed everything.

Soon she and Charlie moved to Columbia, S.C., where she was recruited to teach public health nursing at the University of South Carolina. When they later moved to Spartanburg, S.C., she taught at Twomey Hospital.

Dad was hired by Ford to work at their world headquarters in 1964, and the family (including young sons Chuck and John) moved to Detroit. Polly was hired by the Oakland County Health Dept to start the first Planned Parenthood Clinic in Detroit. Starting such a clinic from scratch at that time was a tough sell in Catholic country, but mom persevered through the challenges, and a thriving clinic still exists today.

Charlie left Ford in 1975, and he and Polly moved to Greenville, S.C. Dad created a heavy truck dealership while mom worked for the Greenville County Public Health Department, doing home health visits.

Dad sold his business in 1981, he and Mom moved to Tallahassee, and Polly started working at the Leon Health Department. It wasn't long before Tallahassee Memorial Healthcare hired her, first as a home health care nurse, and then to help manage their Extended Care Facility.



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Soon the State of Florida recruited her as state inspector, and she loved the work, even though would drive all over North Florida visiting homes and often not get home until late. As a result, she got to know all the nooks and crannies from St. Marks to Sopchoppy to Two Egg to Perry, and all the great little places to eat.

Mom wouldn't come home from anywhere near the coast until she'd stop to eat at Julia Mae's, Posey's, or Boss Oyster bar. Mom loved, loved raw oysters, and consumed at least one and sometimes two dozen raws whenever she possibly could. She celebrated her 90th birthday knocking down a few dozen at the Shell Oyster Bar with her sons and friends.

Mom was fearless and faced adversity head on. She was tough and expected herself (and others) to be at their best. If not our best performance, at least our best efforts. She was the great example.

Mom ran into some rough characters in the areas she worked, but she had a way of being fearless while still able to charm anyone, from the President of Ford to an old oysterman in Panacea. "Everybody has a heart," she'd say, "Some are just harder to find than others"

Dad was the consummate car salesman, but it was mom that loved to drive. Dad rarely drove (thankfully), but mom drove us everywhere while we lived at home, including across the country (47 states) in an unconditioned station wagon for two months of camping one summer.

She and Charlie drove to the mountains and to the seashore, multiple times a year, year after year. Those were her retreats, and so was the drive itself. She would often take the car and drive for hours on the back country roads and down to St Marks and the Refuge by herself, because it was "delicious"

In fact, everything in mom's world was "delicious." The food, the weather, her daily walks, the view, the world around her. Mom's advice whenever we were disappointed or down in the dumps was simple: Stop what you're doing and look around. Walk in the woods. Listen. Smell. See how delicious the world is around us, and be grateful.

Polly loved new challenges, especially if they were outside the norm. She said her life was still evolving in 1967 when she began taking Russian from Madame Gagarin, the mother of the first Soviet cosmonaut. We're not sure what fascinated her more, the language itself (Dr. Zhivago was



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her favorite movie) or the incredible stories Madame Gagarin shared about escaping the Nazis, life in Russia and how she emigrated to the United States.

Mom loved travel and would have travelled the world if she could have talked dad into it. She especially loved teaching international students, because she was excited about their taking home the public health knowledge to their own countries. Our family shared our home with several exchange students over the years, from Mexico, Switzerland, and Spain.

Mom was an inveterate walker. All her life, she would go on one or two daily walks, no matter the weather, even if it was before dawn or after dusk. It kept her clear and connected, and in great health until her last years, even as her balance failed her, forcing her to take her beloved walks with her walker.

Polly loved to cook, and her legendary Brunswick stew and banana pudding were always good for multiple culinary orgasms. She loved Charlie and loved to play golf with him; they played hundreds of courses in almost every state during their decades together. Mom had four holes-in-one, including one when she forgot her golf shoes and played barefoot. Mom was always a sport model.

Mom got to hold Dad's hand as he passed in 2019. We believe he was waiting all these years to finally take hers in return. If so, he probably put a golf club in it and said "Let's go play, sweetie! I've been waiting for you!"

At age 93, Mom took up the challenge of starting a pen pal relationship with an 8-year-old girl she met at her assisted living facility. I couldn't believe how excited she was when she received her first letter. She wasn't sure how to respond, but wanted to make sure it was just right. She asked me to get her some special note cards, and I know she spent some time working on her handwriting for the note. She wanted to give her best effort to this young girl.

It's not clear how one learns empathy, but mom had it and tried to impart it. The golden rule was the rule to live by. In a family of talkers, mom was a great listener.

Mom was loved wherever she was because she cared about people, wherever she was. She was simply an extraordinary woman. Her main goal was to leave the world better than she found it.

Mission accomplished, Mom.



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Our deepest appreciations to the wonderful staff of the TMH Rehabilitation Clinic, the TMH ER (where mom was a frequent visitor), and especially the staff of the Capital Healthcare wound care clinic (where mom was an even more frequent and beloved visitor).

Our most special thanks to all the kind, remarkable and caring staff at Tapestry Senior Living. They are terrific. Mom loved living there, and the staff treated her with tender loving care. “Mrs. Polly is one of the sweetest people I’ve ever met” was a phrase we often heard, just like we’d heard it from others all our lives. And of course, Big Bend Hospice and their loving staff was our saving grace at the end.

Kathryn “Polly” Mitchell is survived by her sons, Chuck (and Patty) Mitchell, and John (and Tina) Mitchell, both of Tallahassee. She is also survived by her wonderful brothers Harry (and Vern) Phelps and Frank Phelps, and her terrific younger sister Patricia (and Woody) Taylor. Many cousins, nieces, nephews, and in-laws likewise mourn her passing. She was the much loved matriarch of the Mitchell and the Phelps clans.

Mom did not want a service, so we will be honoring and remembering her privately. She bequeathed both the TMH Animal Therapy Program and the UNC School of Public Health, and encouraged others to do the same.

She was the best, and we were so incredibly blessed to be in her orbit. We’ll miss and remember her always.



Tribute Wall

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Lifesong Funerals & Cremations shared an album called **Memories Album**.

November 9 at 6:13 AM





Media

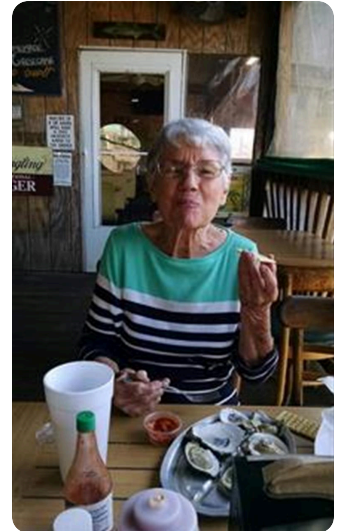
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Lifesong Funerals & Cremations shared 2 photos to the **Memories Album** album.

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Memories only last if you share them

Join us in honoring Kathryn by contributing to a collection of shared memories.



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