



Karen Cornell

February 1, 1947 - February 16, 2026

Karen Jean Cornell, née Byrnes, was born February 1, 1947, a reportedly snowy day, at Little Company of Mary Hospital on the South Side of Chicago. She passed peacefully in hospice at Evanston Hospital, in Evanston, IL, the evening of February 16, 2026.

The youngest of six children born to Edward and Winifred Byrnes, Karen was a spitfire from the start. Her siblings recall watching Karen as young Emily in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* in a high school production and thinking a star had been born. Karen had an abiding love for theater and film for the rest of her life. Her creative talents were prodigious.

In 1964 Karen caught the eye of John Cornell, and according to close friends that was that. The two married in 1969, with sons John (57), and Michael (53) following shortly thereafter. Through 58 years of marriage, Karen was the core of the family. She was an extraordinary partner, mother and advocate, always one to put the needs of others first. Quick to stand up to a bully, she handled tense situations with care, though she was capable in the dark arts when the situation demanded.

Karen explored all manner of pursuits, insatiably curious and talented at once. Her passions had to do with writing, reading, drawing, nature, photography, and leading with kindness. And while her career focused largely on freelance

writing, she thoroughly enjoyed her time as a short order cook, restaurant server and newsstand manager. It was in Karen's nature to find the joy and humor in whatever project she took on. Above all, her heartbeat was advocacy. Those with a disability found a partner in Karen. She had the most beautiful sense of humanity and spent much of her time engaged with matters of consequence, including the Special Olympics, the Adult Down Syndrome Center, and Misericordia.

During the early days of raising their family, Karen and John devised a fantastical scheme few would have followed through on. They sold their home in Evanston, IL, using the proceeds to explore the US and Canada in a motor home for a year, much to the delight of their two sons. Months spent in the Alaskan wilderness would see the family consume an enormous amount of freshly caught salmon; it would take years for the brood to overcome an aversion to the fish. Karen made a point of carving out a few weeks to hitchhike across the west, interested in surveying on her own for a bit. A theme of learning about the world on her terms stretched throughout her life. Money eventually dried up and their trip ended in Santa Fe, NM, where they built from scratch a home with their own hands, and lived for seven years. Karen felt at ease in Santa Fe and returned often.

Karen did not want for much. A self-professed couch potato, she enjoyed newspaper crossword puzzles, watching Masterpiece on PBS, and naps. But nothing seemed to get in the way of spending time with her family and friends, which include daughter-in-law Christine, grandchildren Sela and Paige, bonus grandchildren Hans and Wesley, her late siblings, Edward, Mary and Michael, as well as sisters Kay and Judy, who survive her. Her gift for connection extended further to a motley crew of South Side Chicago Irish, a group of California and Seattle softies, a few New Yorkers straight out of central casting, several additional Karens, one formerly East German, and countless others, all of whom our Karen adored and who all adored her right back.

Conversations with Karen rarely lacked excitement and wonder.

Complementing the pâtissier of a freshly baked croissant was a celebration of sorts, no different than a festive birthday party or holiday gathering. One was the center of it all when talking with Karen.

Tuesdays were typically spent at Misericordia with her “two Johns” enjoying lunch in the Greenhouse, strolling around campus, volunteering, and talking with staff about her son. Karen held Misericordia and those who maintain the integrity of its extraordinary community in high regard. She expressed her gratitude routinely on this front.

Karen had a gift for pluralizing words that could only be singular, and singularizing words that were unquestionably plural. She also had eclectic taste and owned an impossible number of weaved baskets, the receptacles finding their way around the house as if playing a game of musical chairs.

Her moral compass was of the gold standard. She treated everyone with dignity and respect and taught her sons to do the same. In this she was perhaps the quintessential mentor.

Karen afforded one final birthday to her family in the weeks leading up to her passing. Many gathered to celebrate with her, sharing stories, hugs, tears, and love.

One of her favorite tunes to sing was Joan Armatrading’s “I’m Lucky,” as she was often heard reciting the words, “I’m Lucky, I’m Lucky, I can walk under ladders.” It is true she was fortunate to have lived such a full life, but all would agree those in Karen’s orbit were the lucky ones. Karen mattered greatly and she will always be missed.

In Lieu of flowers please click here (<https://www.misericordia.com/pages/giving>) to make a donation to Misericordia.