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News & Publications

Helen Seaborg dies at age 89.



*Helen and Glen Seaborg
Photo Courtesy of LBL*

Helen L. Seaborg passed away on August 29 from pneumonia. Born March 2, 1917, in a Florence Crittenden home in Sioux City , Iowa , she was adopted by George and Iva Griggs. After her father's death, she and her mother moved to the Santa Ana area of southern California .

She worked her way through college, receiving an A.A. from Santa Ana Junior College and a B.A. in English from the University of California, Berkeley in 1939.

She was hired as a secretary for the Nobel-prize winning physicist, Ernest O. Lawrence, who was director of what is now the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. There she met her husband of 56 years, future Nobel laureate Glenn T. Seaborg. They were married in 1942 on their way to Chicago , where they would live while he was working on the Manhattan Project, the World War II project to build the atomic bomb. Helen provided invaluable administrative assistance to the scientists at the code-named Metallurgical Laboratory.

Throughout her husband's renowned career, she provided behind-the-scenes help. Glenn Seaborg often remarked that he could not have managed his many accomplishments without her assistance and advice. Her role as the wife of the chancellor of U.C. Berkeley and chairman of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (from 1961 to 1971) required a mixture of efficiency and diplomacy that she fulfilled with exceptional grace.

Her generous nature was reflected in many volunteer jobs. She felt particularly indebted to the YWCA for the services she had received during a childhood of poverty, and among her many positions, she served on the boards of directors of YWCAs in both Berkeley and Washington , D.C. In Washington, the city's racially segregated past had left it with two YWCA organizations, one white and one black, with predictable friction between the two. Helen's buoyant and unflappable nature allowed her to act as the mediator between the two organizations during the tense negotiations of their merger. During the 1960s in Washington , racial integration of the public schools was often accomplished through a voluntary busing program. Helen was a founder and board member of the INCAP program, a project designed to provide opportunities to elementary school classmates bused from different neighborhoods to continue activities and friendships outside the classroom and during the summer months.

A supporter of open space and an avid hiker, she and Glenn devoted most of their weekends for a year to scouting a hiking route across the state of California . This route was used in 1980 by a project of the American Hiking Society called HikaNation, in which a group of backpackers hiked coast-to-coast. Helen and Glenn joined them on much of their journey across California . Much of the route later became a part of today's coast-to-coast American Discovery Trail.

In her later years, she made a hobby of tracing the genealogy of her biological and adoptive families.

She was preceded in death by her husband Glenn; son Peter Seaborg; and Peter's twin sister Paulette, who died in infancy.

Helen is survived by daughter Lynne Cobb and her husband William Cobb of St. George, Utah; son David Seaborg and his wife Adele Seaborg of Walnut Creek, Calif.; son Stephen Seaborg of La Mesa, Calif.; son Eric Seaborg and his wife Ellen Dudley of Charlottesville, Va.; daughter Dianne Seaborg and her partner Tor Neilands of Lafayette, Calif.; granddaughter Lela Cobb and her fiancé Todd Arthur of Auckland, New Zealand; and granddaughter Molly Cobb of New York City.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the YWCA at UC Berkeley; 2600 Bancroft Way ; Berkeley , CA 94704 .