



Betty Jo Stephens

March 1, 1932 - August 18, 2018

Betty Jo Stephens, age 86, beloved mother, grandmother, philanthropist, and humanitarian passed away peacefully in her sleep on August 18th, 2018 at Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital. A sweet southern girl, Betty was born on March 1st, 1932 in Gadsden, Alabama during the height of the Great Depression to Andrew Jackson Jordan and Clonda Mae Beard.

As a young girl, Betty loved listening to her father play his fiddle and she took great pride growing up in the house he built for her brothers and sister in the deep South. She loved playing down by the Coosa River, home-cooked meals, and listening to the radio together as a family. She always felt that she took after her strong-willed and bold grandmother, Bellezora Fraser, a woman who worked hard her whole life and had run a boardinghouse in Gadsden all on her own. All three of her brothers served in the Pacific during World War II and she spent many difficult months filled with worry and prayed every day that they would come home safe, which thankfully they did. She always dreamed of moving to California, where the glamorous movie stars she idolized lived and a place that offered more opportunities for her family.

Her dream came true when she moved to Los Angeles in the 1950's with most her immediate family in tow. There she raised her two young children, Bruce and Joi while working full-time in the café she owned. After marrying businessman and scientist John A. Stephens, the family settled in Santa

Barbara in 1969, where Betty would go on to spend the rest of her life building a thriving business and contributing to the community through her support of many incredible charities, political committee's, and social causes.

Betty was one of small handful of female CEO's when she ran Excel Mineral Company after taking over for her husband during his long battle with Alzheimer's. Betty cracked the glass ceiling in the male-dominated mineral and mining business, and she expanded the Jonny Cat Litter brand from coast to coast with hundreds of employees whom she worked with from the company headquarters in Goleta.

Betty also championed tirelessly for the advancement of women's causes and rights. From 1978 to 1980 she served as Chair for the California Commission on the Status of Women, which advocated for equal pay and the Equal Rights Amendment among many other issues. She brought down the gavel at the very first meeting of the Democratic Women of Santa Barbara, and remained a supporter of them and the Democratic Party for the rest of her life. Betty counted incredibly influential people as friends such as President Jimmy Carter, Governor Jerry Brown, Speaker Tip O'Neill, Texas Governor Ann Richards, Senator George McGovern and well-known attorney and women's advocate Sarah Weddington. These names are just a fraction of the countless community leaders and activists she befriended throughout her life. She was also a founding member of the Santa Barbara Firefighters Alliance and hosted several of its annual Fire Ball's at her beautiful home.

She was exceptionally supportive of Planned Parenthood and Domestic Violence Solutions, and cared deeply for women's reproductive rights and women who sought support with their children.

Betty was a passionate supporter of the Arts, and spent years bringing dozens of incredible shows to town with her involvement in the Santa Barbara Civic

Light Opera. For almost twenty years, Santa Barbara was gifted with elaborate and award-winning theater productions that rivaled Broadway. She enthusiastically supported the renovation of the Granada Theatre and loved being a part of a team to restore it to its former glory. Only those lucky enough to have attended one of her many incredible fundraisers and parties would know just how fabulous they could be. The parties held at her Hope Ranch home were legendary. One of her favorites was “A Night in Casablanca”, when she reproduced famous scenes from one of her favorite films on her sprawling hilltop estate overlooking the ocean. Betty took great pride in creating a marvelous home and was generous in opening it up for so many different organizations, charities, and individuals she admired. She lovingly designed it to be the home she dreamed of as a little girl, and always considered it a “piece of heaven”. Between the beautiful flowers, vases brimming with succulents, and sweeping views, it really was a paradise that she cherished.

Betty loved music in all shapes and forms, but it was jazz that always ran strongest through her veins. She loved going out to hear local jazz bands, and was generous with her support of the SBCC Jazz Program. She loved to sing along and you could often hear the sweet sounds of her favorite musicians such as Diana Krall and Peggy Lee playing through her home.

Of the many strong relationships she had in her life, one of the most precious to her was with her son Bruce, whom she tragically lost at the age of 45 in 1999. They traveled the world together and maintained a close bond throughout each other’s lives. The love they had for each other could move mountains. After his death, she became involved with the American Heart Association and advocated for their efforts to reduce heart attacks and deaths due to cardiovascular disease.

Betty was loved and adored by her family and friends, and we will always miss and remember her for her incredible sense of humor and love of life. She had a sharp sense of wit, and could always find the best language to describe something that would leave us in stitches. We always knew her and referred to her as our Mama. We were so fortunate to have traveled around the globe with her. Mama was able to visit almost every continent and some of her most precious possessions were beautiful works of art that she proudly brought back to display and marvel at in her home. She would spend hours in museums, picking apart and analyzing every painting and sculpture while appreciating the hard work that went into each piece. She especially loved going to Maui and watching the sunset and whales pass from the lanai. Even in Maui, she was a regular with the local jazz scene and was always in the front row applauding her favorite band at the Cool Cat Cafe.

There is a huge hole in our hearts without our family matriarch, but we take comfort knowing that she is now able to join her son, mama and daddy whom she loved so much and never stopped missing. She will be dearly missed by those who loved and learned so much from her during her lifetime.

Betty is survived by her daughter Joi Stephens and her husband Frank Kaminski, her grandchildren John Stephens and his husband Christopher Stephens-Gusman, Ryan Chacon and his fiancé Heather Ambrose, Alexandra Djordjevic-Stephens, Ernie Harries, and her great-granddaughter Ila Harries.

She is preceded in death by her parents, son Bruce Walley, brothers Jack Jordan, James Jordan, John Jordan, and her sister Peggy Romero.

A viewing will be held on Friday, August 24th from 5:00pm to 8:00pm at Welch-Ryce-Haider Funeral Chapel at 15 E. Sola St, Santa Barbara. A public memorial will be held at Welch-Ryce-Haider Funeral Chapel on Saturday, August 25th at 11:00am.

To keep in the spirit of her contributive nature, the family asks for donations to be made to the any of the following organizations in her name: American Heart Association, Planned Parenthood, and Domestic Violence Solutions.

- John Thaddeus Stephens

Previous Events

Viewing

AUG **24**. 5:00 PM - 8:00 PM (PT)

Welch-Ryce-Haider - Downtown
15 E. Sola St.
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
(805) 965-5145
info@wrhsb.com
<https://www.wrhsb.com>

Memorial Service

AUG **25**. 11:00 AM (PT)

Welch-Ryce-Haider - Downtown
15 E. Sola St.
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
(805) 965-5145
info@wrhsb.com
<https://www.wrhsb.com>