



## Irene Marie Nordquist Sahyun

September 9, 1940 - July 21, 2025

Red-haired Irene died at home of complications related to diabetes and dementia at age 84. Born in Vancouver, B.C., she graduated from Magee High School, along with her twin sister Marjory, and Irene entered nursing school at St. Paul's Hospital in downtown Vancouver. There she formed lifelong friendships with fellow nursing students, and completed her RN in 1961. After a short stint in Prince George, BC, Irene emigrated to California and assumed a nursing position at UCLA Medical Center. During this time Irene met her future husband Mel (Melville) Sahyun; they were married on April 12, 1966. The best job opportunity for Mel was with 3M in St. Paul, Minnesota, where they relocated later in 1966. There they raised their two sons, Steven and Michael. Irene and Mel would return to Mel's home town of Santa Barbara in retirement. Despite having emigrated and become an American citizen, Irene remained proud of her Canadian heritage.

In Canada Irene had been raised in the United Church of Canada; in the United States she joined the Episcopal (Anglican) Church and became active in it. She was a strong advocate for women's ordination to the priesthood, was on the support team for the Minnesota members of the "Philadelphia Eleven", the first women to be so ordained in 1974, and lobbied the 1976 General Convention, which ultimately formally approved the practice. She served on vestry (parish council), as an usher, reader and lay Eucharistic minister in the parishes of which she was a member.

In Minnesota, Irene was active in continuing her education. She completed

her B.A. from Metropolitan State University (St. Paul, MN), then obtained an M.A. from University of St. Thomas and an M.S. from University of Wisconsin—Stout (Menomonie, WI). Irene also became involved in Minnesota politics, particularly in the 1980s right after she became an American citizen, with an emphasis on women's issues. She served as a DFL (Democratic Party) ward chair in St. Paul, MN, in the early 1990s.

Travel has always been a priority for Irene; Mel and Irene's honeymoon in Hawai'i was at her initiative. Numerous trips to Europe followed. In 1983 they took sons Steven and Michael, then 14 and 11, to Greece, Austria and Yugoslavia (Slovenia and Croatia). Later for a graduation gift they accompanied Michael to a reunion of Nordkvist relatives in Sweden. Other destinations included China, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, Israel and Jordan, Argentina, and Japan, and many places in North America, often by train. Irene also traveled independently; she attended the Passion Play in Oberammergau, Germany, in 1990, and participated in festivities for the 100th birthday of her great-aunt Ana Jonsson in Sweden in 1998.

Travel gave Irene a chance to practice her growing photographic skills. She participated in camera clubs, won awards, and exhibited internationally. Most of her work was done on film; in 2003 she "went digital", but with less enthusiasm than for film photography. Photography is a hobby that both Mel and Irene shared. So also was dancing, ballroom and tango; great for the later years!

In those later years, as the resources became available to her, she focused on philanthropy. After returning to Santa Barbara, Irene was instrumental in persuading her Sahyun family to donate property to the Santa Barbara County Genealogical Society, which resulted in establishment of the Sahyun Genealogy Library. Among the organizations she supported were the Foundation Fighting Blindness, BrightFocus Foundation, and GAIA Global Health. Through the latter she endowed a fellowship, now named in her honor, for training nurses in Malawi, Africa.

Irene is predeceased by her brothers, John Raymond (1935-1976) and Frank

(1950-2021), and survived by her sisters, her twin Marjory (Hirst) and Lorna (Menzies), and her brother Clifford, all of Vancouver, BC, her husband of 59 years, Mel, their sons Steven (Martha) and Michael (Katherine), of Whitewater, WI, and Minneapolis, MN, respectively, and her grandchildren, Leif, Cedar and Gwynne. Irene's family thanks the dedicated caregivers of The Key, who facilitated her final years. Memorials may be made to the Alzheimer's Disease Research fund of BrightFocus Foundation (Baltimore, MD). Irene's life will be celebrated in a memorial Eucharist at Trinity Episcopal Church in Santa Barbara at 3:00 pm on Saturday, August 23, 2025.

MRVS

# Cemetery Details

## Santa Barbara Cemetery

901 Channel Drive  
Santa Barbara, CA 93108

# Previous Events

## Memorial

AUG **23**. 3:00 PM (PT)

Trinity Episcopal Church  
1500 State Street  
Santa Barbara, CA