



Joan Karff

July 30, 1936 - September 2, 2016

Joan Mag Karff was born in July 1936, in New Britain, Connecticut, to Sam and Fanny Mag. Joan went to Northfield School for Girls in Northfield, MA and then to Mt. Holyoke College in S. Hadley, MA. She graduated from Mt. Holyoke in 1958 Magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa with a major in Sociology and Economics. Joan is survived by her husband, Samuel Karff, and her children, Rachel Karff Weissenstein, Amy Karff Halevy (and her husband, Amir), and Liz Karff Seitz, her grandchildren (Josh, Ben, and Emily Weissenstein, Jacob and Daniel Halevy, and Zack and Zoë Kampf), her brother, Eliot Mag (and his wife, Kathi) and sister, Marge Andrews (and her husband, Norman) and her sister in-law, Elana Kohn (and her husband, Lou), along with her cousin, Bruce Stern (and his wife, Silvia) and many nieces and nephews.

In June, 1959, Joan married Sam Karff, who was then the assistant rabbi at her family's congregation, Temple Beth Israel, in Hartford, Connecticut. Their beautiful and loving marriage lasted for 57 years. They shared an intellectual curiosity, a strong bond of mutual respect and support, devotion to each other and to their family and friends, a love for reading, and a dedication to the Houston Astros. Their marriage was the best that life can offer, and they both knew and appreciated how very blessed they were to go through the journey of life together.

After just two years in Flint, Michigan, where Joan and Sam had two

daughters, they moved to Chicago, Illinois, where their third daughter was born. In 1975, Joan and Sam moved to Houston, Texas, where Sam would become the Senior Rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel. Joan was an amazing mother and grandmother. She was loving and imaginative - and had a wonderfully close relationship with each of her three daughters, who all live in Houston. She was the perfect role model for her three girls, and she created a home that was overflowing with love and laughter. One could never know exactly what would cause her to dissolve into giggles, but when this happened, her laughter was contagious. She was a proud grandmother to Josh, Ben, and Emily, Jacob and Daniel, and Zack and Zoë.

Joan was a life-long Democrat, who would defend her positions with passion, insight and eloquence at every opportunity. She was extraordinarily well versed in history and enjoyed reading memoirs of historical figures. Dance was also a lifelong passion of hers. Although she began as a ballet dancer, Joan started taking modern dance classes as a young woman. In 1975, she founded Joan Karff's New Dance Group, and she proudly led that company for over 20 years. During those years, Joan created beautiful and elegant dances; her work was greatly influenced by the artistic legacy of Martha Graham and other iconic modern dancers. Joan's creative gift was really as a storyteller, and her dancers were the words she used to tell a story. One of her favorite dances was "Study in Black and White," which beautifully depicted the burgeoning love between a black man and white woman. "Study in Black and White" won Joan a state prize in dance. Another favorite of hers was a series of dances she choreographed based on the writings and letters of the poet, Sylvia Plath. Joan felt a special affinity with Plath who attended Smith College, which is just around the corner from Joan's alma mater, Mt. Holyoke. In addition to her company, Joan also taught dance from 1976-1984 at Rice University.

In 2001, Joan decided she needed a change from the dance company, and

she started Women on the Way Up, a mentoring program at Lamar High School. Each year, ten rising senior girls were chosen to participate in this yearlong program. Almost all the young women were minority students who came from underprivileged backgrounds. Since its founding, nearly every graduate of Women on the Way Up has completed college and many have gone on to obtain graduate degrees. Joan's goal was to be a mentor for these young women; she expanded their awareness of the world and showed them the opportunities that she knew existed for them beyond the worlds that they came from. Joan's contagious love of learning inspired her students to learn more about the world, while promoting their social, political, economic, and intellectual growth. Joan took them on field trips to the symphony, theater, dance concerts, and art exhibits and brought in speakers on various topics. Recently, there was a reception at the Karff home where 50 of the graduates returned to pay tribute to Joan and thank her for inspiring them and helping them to achieve (and often surpass) their goals. Through Women on the Way Up, Joan's legacy will extend far beyond her own family.

Donations may be made to Women On the Way Up, Lamar High School, Houston, Texas; Attention Dr. Gary Patterson, 3325 Westheimer Road, Houston, Texas 77098.