

Elizabeth Sutorius 24 October 1915 – 11 November 2009

Teacher shared love of dancing

Elizabeth Sutorius had a lifelong love of Scottish Highland dancing. As a child, she and her twin sister performed with their parents, who had met through Scottish dancing. As an adult, Mrs. Sutorius taught Highland dance to hundreds of San Diegans and was recognized throughout North America for her dedication to teaching and promoting the ancient folk dance and Scottish culture.

Mrs. Sutorius died of heart failure Nov. 11 in San Diego. She was 94.

She was born in Canada and grew up in Los Angeles but she remained true to her Scottish roots. Her parents were native Scots who were children when their families immigrated to Canada. Mrs. Sutorius followed the family tradition of performing and later teaching Scottish Highland dancing. Her aunt, Mary Isdale MacNab, was a renowned Canadian Highland dance teacher. Mrs. Sutorius was known as "Aunt Beth" to her students and while she was a no-nonsense disciplinarian, she was also beloved and respected by her young charges.

"She was an excellent teacher," said Carole Forester, a family friend and former student. "She expected her students to do well. She was very supportive and always interested in youth. She was (the parent) who would take a group of children to the beach or the park." Former student Claudia Lundie said Mrs. Sutorius taught more than dance steps. "Besides my parents, she had the greatest single effect on my life," Lundie said. "She taught us sportsmanship and to be respectful, considerate and supportive of others and to be proud of who we were."

Mrs. Sutorius established her school, San Diego Highland Dancers, in 1955. She was president of the Associated Judges and Teachers of California in 1970, and in 1983 she was honored at the North American Conference of Professional Scottish Arts as one of the 12 outstanding Highland dance teachers in North America. She was dance director at the San Diego Scottish Highland Games for many years.

Her students participated in competitions and performed throughout the state including at the Palladium, on Art Linkletter's TV show, at California folk festivals, in the Rose Parade in Pasadena and in several appearances at Disneyland. Local performances included the City Light Opera (Starlight) Company, the San Diego County Fair and various schools and charity fundraisers.

"Her students were not only beautiful dancers but also wonderful people and she felt proud to have played a role in their lives," said Marilyn Bonner, Mrs. Sutorius' daughter. "My mom was a taskmaster when it came to discipline. She really instilled (in her students) the importance of doing your very best and working as a team. She had us wear red jackets with the dance group emblem (on road trips), so it was obvious if one of her dancers was misbehaving."

Elizabeth Sutorius was born Oct. 24, 1915, in Vancouver to Elizabeth and Robert Lowe. She and her twin sister, Agnes Helen, began dancing when they were 4. The family moved to Los Angeles in 1919. She and her husband, Clark Sutorius, moved to San Diego in 1941. In addition to teaching Highland dance, Mrs. Sutorius taught preschool in San Diego. Hortensia Lopez was her aide for more than 25 years at Burbank Elementary.

"She was very dedicated to her students and she was good with the parents," Lopez said.

Many parents didn't speak English but Mrs. Sutorius tried to make them feel welcome in her classroom, she said. Mrs. Sutorius is survived by her daughter, Marilyn Bonner; six grandchildren; and seven great-grandchildren. She was predeceased by her husband and a son, Gordon.

A celebration of her life will be held at 10 am Friday at Cuvier Park in La Jolla.

The family suggests contributions to San Diego Hospice.

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