

Extraordinary Life: A Politician And A Role Model In West Hartford



Nan Glass, a longtime resident of West Hartford who survived the 1944 Hartford circus fire and grew up to be a journalist and eventually mayor of West Hartford, died Aug. 10 at age 88. (Family photo)

By **Anne M. Hamilton**

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Nan Glass spent her professional life as a vital part of the West Hartford community, as a journalist, a town official, and a popular mayor.

“She was a role model, not just for women, but for any town official,” said former West Hartford Town Manager Barry Feldman. “She was part of that vanguard of women being more than bystanders in the community, moving off the sidelines.”

Nan Elaine Lewis Glass, a longtime resident of West Hartford, died Aug. 10 in Durham, N.C., of cancer at age 88. She had moved to North Carolina several years ago to be closer to her daughter.

She became interested in politics at the time of the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, when she and her family watched riot police subdue a crowd of protesters. “She was riveted,” said her daughter Amy. “They all decided it was time to get involved locally.”

Glass was the oldest of three girls born to Elizabeth and Robert Lewis. She was born on June 7, 1929, in Hartford, and grew up in West Hartford surrounded by her extended family of Polish Jewish emigres.

When she was 15, she took her younger sister and two cousins to the Ringling Brothers circus in Hartford, where they survived the catastrophic circus fire that killed 167 people and wounded more than 700.

She and her sister were helped to safety by a police officer, but they lost sight of the cousins. It was not until they reached their aunt’s house that they discovered the other children had crawled under the tent and were already home. “It was frightful. She felt so responsible,” recalled her sister, Fran Baer, more than 70 years after the traumatic event. “It left scars.”

In those days, no one had therapy for trauma. “You brushed yourself off, and you carried on,” said Amy Glass, but for the rest of her life, Nan Glass tried to avoid small spaces and always sat on the outside, nearest the door.

Her father began his career as a reporter at the Hartford Courant, then worked as a photographer at the Hartford Times, where he became the photo editor. While she was in high school, Glass worked as a runner at the Times, taking the reporters’ typewritten copy down to the composing room. After graduating in 1950 from the University of Connecticut, where she majored in English literature, she worked briefly in the university’s public information office, reporting on events and writing press releases.

In 1951, she married Harvey Glass, a Hartford resident, and lived in Philadelphia and New Jersey while he got his doctorate and while he worked during the early years of his career as a child psychologist. They moved first to Simsbury and then to West Hartford, where they raised their four children. She wrote frequent letters to the editor to The Courant and the New York Times, some of which were published, expressing her opinions about current events.

In 1971, she applied for a job as a reporter with the West Hartford News, a weekly newspaper that was part of Imprint Newspapers, a small chain of local newspapers owned by Chris Larsen. Richard Woodworth, the new managing editor, wanted to replace many of the staff with more experienced reporters, and he interviewed Glass — whose journalistic experience was limited.

“We just hit it off,” recalled Woodworth, who was impressed by her wide range of connections and offered her a job. “She applied at the right time. She was a wonderful resource and a great writer.”

Her part-time reporter’s job eventually turned into the position of managing editor, and Glass earned a reputation for being tough and fair. “She knew so many people and had so many contacts,” said Woodworth, who went on to publish many travel books with his late wife, Nancy.

“She was a fantastic editor and had a real sense of what a town like West Hartford wanted to read about,” said Adele Angle, one of the reporters who worked under Glass. Unlike some local newspapers, the News did more than just summarize what was said at council or board of education meetings. “She wanted real news not just stenography,” Angle said. “She had a strong news sense and didn’t tolerate fools, and was very sharp about who was trying to cozy up to her.”

Glass was part of a group of journalists from the different papers in the chain who became fast friends; they called themselves the Imprint Ladies, and they held a reunion lunch last year, organized by Glass.

One day in 1973, Glass’ phone rang, and the caller was Harry Kleinman, chairman of the West Hartford Democratic town committee. “It’s not a scoop but recruitment. We are looking for someone to run for town council,” he told her. Glass accepted his invitation and abandoned journalism for public service.

As friendly as she was, Glass also could be firm. At the beginning of her campaign for the council seat, Kevin Sullivan, an up-and-coming politician whose job was to manage the Democratic slate, sat down at her kitchen table to outline the essentials of a successful campaign.

“It was an elaborate plan: fundraising, mailings, door-to-door,” recalled Sullivan, who is now the state Commissioner of Revenue Services. He met resistance.

“I’m not doing that,” countered Glass, who went on to win the council seat her own way. (It didn’t hurt that she had grown up in West Hartford, raised her children there, had edited the local paper and was a gregarious person.)

Glass served two terms on the council before trading that unpaid position for the elected job of West Hartford Town Clerk (she was endorsed by both parties). She spent 15 years in that job, which she loved because it put her in the middle of everything that was going on in town, from house sales to death notices to the voting process. She once told Sullivan that the clerk’s job was the one she had liked the most: “I didn’t have to do all the politics.” (In the early 1980’s, when Sullivan was the mayor and Glass was the clerk, he prepared some council resolutions and handed them to her. She replied, “I write these things. You are just the mayor.”)

After Glass retired from the town clerk position in 1995, the Democrats persuaded her to run again for the council, and she was the top vote-getter, which meant she became the mayor. She was the fourth woman to hold that position, following Catherine Reynolds, Anne Streeter and Sandra Klebanoff. (Shari Cantor, the current mayor of West Hartford, is the fifth woman to be the top vote-getter in the council elections.) Glass declined to run again following a serious back injury.

On the council, as town clerk and as mayor, Glass drew on her wide knowledge of the town, its residents and its issues. “She was bright, inquisitive, had firm opinions, was sympathetic and had a gentle touch when it was needed, but she could be pretty firm,” said Feldman, whose was town manager from 1985 to 2006 and overlapped much of Glass’ public service.

One day, when he had been town manager only a few months, Feldman and Glass, who was then town clerk, surveyed the auditorium of the old Hall High School, which was scheduled for renovation. Feldman looked at the threadbare curtain in front of the stage and proclaimed that it should be replaced by “something regal and navy blue.” Glass responded “with a stare that signaled that you did something horribly wrong,” Feldman said. “She said, ‘No. It will be hunter green.’” The new curtain was, and is, hunter green.

“Nan Glass was an institution to those of us working in local government,” said Bloomfield Town Manager Philip Schenck, who was the manager in Avon when Glass was a town official. “Always available to answer a question, quick with an insightful opinion, or sometimes just a friend to mull over thorny issues with.”

“She knew how to bring people together; she was a facilitator and negotiator,” said Ethel Fried, one of the Imprint Ladies. When Glass served on the town’s Sesquicentennial Planning Committee, Fried said Glass managed to forge an agreement between two sparring members that was delaying the process. “All of a sudden, it was working.” Glass was no longer mayor at the time of the celebration in 2004, but commissioned an illustrated history of the town, “Celebrate! West Hartford.”

Glass and her husband divorced in the mid-1970s, and he died in 2010. Their son, David, died in 1998 when a drunk driver crashed into his car. Glass is survived by her sons Alan and Mitch, her daughter, Amy Glass, seven grandchildren, and her sister, Fran Baer.

Glass was an avid consumer of books — especially mysteries — and newspapers, and played bridge and Scrabble with skill and flair. After retiring, Glass moved to a one-story apartment in Asylum Hill and began to volunteer her time serving lunches at the Loaves and Fishes soup kitchen and helping a scholarship program at the Connecticut Children’s Medical Center in Hartford.

Though she had lived in the suburbs for decades, she loved being in the city, where she explored new restaurants and attended concerts, the theater and art exhibits. She went to events at Hartford Public Library and the Connecticut Historical Society, and encouraged all her friends to follow her lead.

“Anyone doing something new or interesting, we’d like to have people go there,” said Joyce Rossignol, an Imprint friend and frequent companion. One favorite outing was to Effie’s Restaurant, just when the breakfast crowd was breaking up, or to the Fernwood Restaurant, where the menu never changed. Glass knew someone everywhere she went.

“We were both nosy reporters,” Rossignol said. “If something was happening, we wanted to know about it. If everybody had a Nan Glass in their lives, you could have a lot of fun.”

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