



Mary Lenore "Lee" Kelly

September 23, 1947 - December 19, 2024

Austin's grand dame of "society journalism" has passed away.

Mary Lenore "Lee" Kelly died on December 19, 2024 at Brookdale–Westlake Hills upon returning from a week's stay at St. David's South Austin Hospital, where she'd entered hospice care.

Just two weeks earlier Lee had marked the 24th anniversary of her first lung transplant. Lee was believed to be the longest living recipient from the San Antonio transplant center. She twice received the gift of a lung, receiving another in 2015.

That was the end of her life – but she'd be sorely upset to not remind everyone how she lived.

Lee, 77, grew up in Baltimore, MD as the only daughter of a Pontiac car dealer executive and stay-at-home mother, and sister to three brothers.

She spent her childhood taking care of her horse Dandy and participating in local horse shows. She found her chosen career of journalism early and wrote articles for the Baltimore News-American while still in high school. She also earned extra income as a model, appearing in ads for Hutzler's, a local department store. A lifelong Catholic, Lee attended Maryvale, a Catholic girls' school (which she donated to throughout her life). She attended Notre Dame College in Baltimore before getting her first full-time newspaper job at the prestigious St. Petersburg Times, where she earned accolades as a religion reporter, including a national religion writer's award.

Lee came to Austin in 1977 for the Austin American-Statesman, covering religion and the University of Texas, then became a columnist covering Austin's wealthy and influential when a much smaller cadre of leaders ran the city.

Despite her own relatively quiet social life, she attended the parties and charity fundraisers of city, state and national leaders. She came to personally know luminaries such as Lady

Bird Johnson and former Austin mayor Roy Butler, attending events both in their homes and at charity fundraisers. She covered Queen Elizabeth's trip to Austin.

Lee delighted in breaking news stories in her columns after learning about a major event at a party. Sometimes she would slip Page 1 news into her column – and she loved it!

Lee took a leave from the newspaper in the mid-1990s when her health seriously worsened and she learned she must get a lung transplant to survive. She never could return to the newsroom, even though she always intended to return to journalism.

As the excellent reporter she was, she researched her health options doggedly and hounded her doctors and nurses when she found she needed a lung. Lee had been a heavy smoker while a reporter and was known for walking back and forth next to her desk, talking on the phone with on a long phone line as she paced.

Her youngest brother Richard was the primary relative to travel to see her in Austin, along with her cousin Lynn Jeppi.

Philanthropist Dick Rathgeber regularly cooked Lee a big ham for her birthday or holidays. Austin Symphony doyenne Jane Sibley attended her small birthday parties at Chez Zee long after she'd left the newspaper. Lee's book club members included the likes of early Austin high tech guru Bobby Inman and priests at St. Theresa's Catholic Church, which she once attended.

Lee also loved Roy Orbison music.

The real stars of Lee's life were her "babies" – her dachshunds Silky, Zorro, Maybelle, Oscar and Rosie. She delighted in their antics and cheered them on during the early days of the Buda Dachshund Races. Her main concern as she aged was who would care for her pups if she were to pass away. The last of them died three years ago. Until the end she talked of adopting another dog, even though much of her pets' care had begun to fall more and more on her friend Mark Griffith's generous help. A cadre of friends continued to reach out to Lee as her health worsened. Mary Ann Roser took her shopping and to buy glasses. Her friend Michael Merrick drove her to San Antonio for her transplant checkups.

Throughout the 40-plus years I have been her friend, in good times and bad, trying to help Lee with technological challenges, discussing her health downturns, and relating events in our lives. We both shared a love of horses. I especially appreciated her careful editing at times of my newspaper stories. She loved coming in our Cook kid birthday parties when

my children were young and some years, when she felt better, she'd come to our family Thanksgiving dinners.

During the last year, Lee's friend Kathy Farady had taken charge of helping Lee, especially after a major health incident forced her to leave her condo and move into Brookdale. Kathy was the angel who came into Lee's life at the end.

Lee would want others to consider donating to Central Texas Dachshund Rescue in her memory and her beloved schools, Maryvale and Notre Dame College.

The family plans to hold a memorial service in Baltimore in the spring for Lee. She will be buried at the family plot in Baltimore, her brother says. Plans for any memorial event in Austin are pending.

Tribute Wall

KS

“ I just heard of Lee’s passing. I am remembering all the good times on East Wind Road. My thoughts and prayers are with you.
Kathleen Parr Stewart

Kathleen Parr Stewart - April 07, 2025 at 10:04 AM

LJ

“ Although Lee had an outstanding career in Journalism... starting when she attended Maryvale Preparatory School in Brooklandville MD... working at the News American a former local newspaper...which extended through the years to her prestigious position as a columnist at the Austin American Statesman... she was in actually my COUSIN and my BEST FRIEND.

Lynn Jeppi - January 06, 2025 at 01:03 PM

LJ

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Lynn Jeppi - January 06, 2025 at 12:53 PM