



Marlene Leone

June 7, 1942 - March 2, 2026

Celebrating the remarkable life of Marlene Leone (1942-2026).

A pioneer by both necessity and conviction, Marlene forged a life defined by courage, independence, and professional excellence. Her career spent expanding notions of what could be done at weddings and corporate events, was not simply a job, but a declaration. It was not just what she did, but who she was.

In an era that rarely made space for female ambition, she willed her own path, working with style, smarts, and a curated confidence that made her stand out in any room she occupied. Indeed, she stepped into rooms where women were not expected, and earned and demanded respect with dedication, creativity, poise and grace. And she led the way for others who followed.

Marlene was born in 1942 and raised in Cleveland, Ohio with her sister JoAnn and brother Rick. She graduated from West Tech High School in 1959. While in High School and afterwards, she worked at the Sheraton in Cleveland, before moving to Washington DC, where she worked on the one-year Inaugural Anniversary party for JFK. She then moved to Chicago, becoming part of the team that opened the first O'Hare Airport Hotel (later O'Hare Hilton).

In 1975, before Water Tower Place was fully constructed, she was hired as Catering Manager at the Ritz Carlton Chicago, one of the first 5 employees hired at the first Four Seasons Hotel built in 50 years. Three years later, she was promoted to Director of Catering. As one columnist described, during her three-decades-long career, she could “cite names like a gossip columnist,” having planned events for presidents, celebrities, leading names in the City of Chicago and corporate executives. Her work was 35% social (mostly weddings) and 65% corporate events. In a number of cases, she hosted bar or bat mitzvahs for an individual, their wedding a few years later, then their child’s bar or bat mitzvah too. Stand out moments include the party she did for John Glenn, the “special tea” she made sure was available and served to President Clinton, the “time they got a pony up to the 12th floor ballroom” so a father could surprise his daughter at a bat mitzvah, the time Walter Payton ate a pastry “right out of her hand,” and having the pleasure of meeting Julia Child and Sophia Loren. She was a member of several gourmet and industry groups including the Catering Executives Club of America, Les Dames d’Escoffier, and Confrerie de la Chaine des Rotisseurs. In 1992, she was named Chicago Hotel Woman of the Year, and in 1997, she was given a lifetime achievement award, the first ever granted to a woman, by the Catering Executives Club of America.

After retirement, Marlene co-founded D&M Events, planning and coordinating weddings. She was a guest lecturer at Cornell University School of Hospitality, consulted at Deer Path Inn in Lake Forest, instructed at Kendall College, and was a frequent contributor to local and national social articles and magazines.

Marlene lived with her mother, affectionately known as “Nanny” and her daughter, Johna, in Des Plaines, Illinois from the early 1970’s until Johna finished law school in 1996, when she moved downtown Chicago, a block off the lake, at Irving Park and Pine Grove. Marlene was at home in a high-rise, in close proximity to food, opera, ballet, city golf courses, and the lake. In 2013,

she moved to Sarasota, Florida, where she enjoyed warmer weather, golfing, tai chi, a delightful village of friends, and holiday visits with Johna and her beloved grandson, Jaden. In 2020, through DNA testing, Marlene learned she had another sister, Gail, who lived in Atlanta and who became a dear addition to her family. In 2023, Marlene's health compelled a move back to Chicagoland and into assisted living at Trulee Senior Living in Evanston, where she lived a block away from Johna and Jaden through the end of her life.

Cherished mother of Johna Gabrielle Hedden (nee Gaffke), devoted grandmother ("Nona") of Jaden Grae Hedden. She is also survived by her son John (Danielle) Gaffke of Gurnee and his family, and her siblings Richard J. (Linda) Leone of Pigeon Forge, TN and Gail Ann (William Heinze) Hoffman of Atlanta.

Inimitable Aunt of Michele and Mike (Debbie) Haydu, Ricky Leone, Christina (Jay) Bufkin and Kimberly (Chip) Hinson; Great Aunt of Lisa Delzoppo, Mataja (Fred) King, Brandon DiDona, Rhiannon Haydu, Tina (Robert) Bourdette, Nick Taylor and Jenny Taylor, Kaitlyn Hinson and Alex Hinson, all of Ohio, John (Trae) Coleman III and Skyler Center, both of Tennessee, and Justin Hoffman Kahler of Georgia, and Great-Great Aunt to their beloved children.

Bonus Grandma to Hailey (Austin) Freeberg, Savannah Hedden, Sommer Hedden, Jessica Douglas and Hailey (Kurtis) Kwak, adored "M" to like-a-son Joseph Monastero and the wonderful Monastero family, simply, profoundly, "Mama" to cherished colleagues at the Ritz Carlton, and unforgettable friend to many.

Preceded in death by her loving mother Mary Gabrielenia ("Nanny") Leone (nee Fiorillo), her father Joseph Leone, her sister JoAnn (Jim) Volle, her

former spouse John G. Gaffke, her great nephew Michael A. Haydu, her beloved Bichon Frise Cajoline ("CJ") and her Standard Poodle, Mon Petit Chou ("Chou Chou").

Memorial mass at 11:30am on Saturday, March 28th at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church 1775 Grove St, Glenview, IL 60025.

Watch the service here: [https://vimeo.com/olphglenview/marleneleone?share=copy](https://vimeo.com/olphglenview/marleneleone?share=cop).

Download the service here: <https://vimeo.com/olphglenview/download/1173579337/00460e1f1c>.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made in her name to Thresholds <https://www.thresholds.org/>

Arrangements by Inclusive Funeral Care, 773-318-1305 or www.InclusiveFuneralCare.com.

Previous Events

Memorial Mass

MAR 28. 11:30 AM - 12:30 PM (CT)

Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church

1775 Grove Street

Glenview, IL 60025

<https://olphglenview.org/>

Tribute Wall



“ *Inclusive Funeral Care created a Webcast in memory of Marlene Leone*



Team Inclusive Funeral Care - March 14 at 09:11 PM

RF

“ *Richard Leone Family lit a candle in memory of Marlene Leone*



Richard Leone Family - March 23 at 01:47 PM

RF

“ *Richard Leone and family purchased the Dreams From the Heart Bouquet for the family of Marlene Leone.*



Richard Leone and family - March 23 at 01:37 PM

GS

“ *Ginger, Deirdre, Laura, Shannon & Stacy purchased the Beautiful Dreams for the family of Marlene Leone.*



Ginger, Deirdre, Laura, Shannon & Stacy - March 18 at 01:51 PM

TL

“ *The Exelon LE&B purchased the Joyful Memory for the family of Marlene Leone.*



The Exelon LE&B - March 18 at 10:21 AM

JC

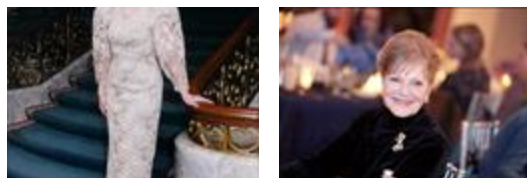
“ *Joe Chambers purchased the Sweet Tranquility Basket for the family of Marlene Leone.*



Joe Chambers - March 13 at 11:12 AM



“ *2 files added to the album Memories Album*



Team Inclusive Funeral Care - March 03 at 07:20 PM