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February 24, 2017

Obituary: Mary Coan

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Mary Willette Bishop Coan died in her home on Feb. 11 from pancreatic cancer. She was 89.

Mary was born on January 12, 1928, in Indianapolis, Ind., the youngest of three children of Ruth A. Trueblood and Richard E. Bishop. She attended Shortridge High School and Smith College, graduating in 1950. In what would prove to be a pivotal experience of her life, she spent her senior year in Paris and the following year teaching English in Marseilles. Mary reveled in her studies of French language, literature and culture, politics, art and architecture, spent the summer of 1950 bicycling through France, Italy and Austria, and during the summer of 1951, served as an interpreter for lectures on architecture at the École du Louvre at Fontainebleau.

Upon her return to the U.S., Mary worked at the Institute of International Education in New York, where she met Stuart F. G. Coan, a doctoral student at Columbia University; they were married in 1954. They remained in New York City until 1957, when they moved to Irvington-on-Hudson, and eventually settled in Greenwich in 1963 after the birth of their fourth child.

Over the course of their lives in Greenwich, Mary and Stuart devoted themselves to many civic and social causes. As a couple, they were instrumental in the planning and construction of the Cos Cob Library building and helped to ensure its ongoing service to the community. They were leaders of the South Cos Cob Association and loyal members of the local Democratic Party, volunteering at the polls for every election. They were founding members of At Home in Greenwich. Mary served for several years on the RTM, volunteered for the Oral History Project and the Greenwich Arts Council, and was an avid member of Alliance Française. More than 30 years after her graduation from Smith, Mary earned an M.A., with honors, in French language and civilization from New York University.

In her professional life, Mary taught French, worked in the editorial department of the New York Graphic Society and became an editor at Progressive Architecture magazine. At PA, she thrived in a stimulating community that allowed her to combine her considerable literary skills with her lifelong love of art and architecture. In later years, she continued to work as a freelance editor and translator.

A wonderful cook and baker, Mary loved to entertain informally and sparkled when hosting friends and family. She adored music, was a talented pianist and regularly attended classical music concerts and choral performances, but also relished Gershwin and Rodgers & Hammerstein.

A keen horticulturist, she became a certified Master Gardener. Athletic throughout her life, Mary loved to walk, bicycle, swim, ice skate and play tennis, yet she was also a voracious reader. The key to Mary's essence, however, was her enthusiasm for people, young and old, whom she charmed with her warmth, curiosity, openness and generosity of spirit through her final years. Her embrace of life in all of its manifestations was unique. A devoted wife, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and friend to many, Mary was the epitome of an enlightened humanist.

She is survived by two daughters, Rachel Coan Zeche and Lucy Helfrich; two sons, Christian S. and Peter F. G.; seven grandchildren, Alec, Fritz, Sam and Jack Coan, and Lily, Emma and Ben Helfrich, and two great-grandchildren, Lindsay and Benjamin Honan.

Gifts in Mary's memory may be made to Friends of the Cos Cob Library, Smith College, At Home in Greenwich, or to a charity of one's choice.

