



Mary Jean Irion

October 16, 2019

Mary Jean Irion, 96, died on Wednesday, October 16, 2019, surrounded by her family in Willow Street, PA.

Born in Newport, Kentucky, Mary Jean grew up in Elyria, Ohio. There she met her beloved husband, Paul E. Irion, in 9th grade algebra class. They celebrated 75 years of marriage on August 29th. She was the daughter of the late Verda and Mary McNeill McElfresh and raised from infancy by her grandparents, Joe and Carrie McElfresh.

Prior to moving to Lancaster County in 1960, Mary Jean and Paul, a minister and seminary professor, lived in St. Louis, Missouri, and Tioga and Long Grove, Illinois. They resided on Kready Avenue in Millersville from 1962 to 2003, when they moved to Willow Valley Communities.

An accomplished and passionate poet, essayist, and teacher, her prose work includes three published books: "From the Ashes of Christianity" (1968), "Yes, World, A Mosaic of Mediation" (1970), both concerning the post-Christian era, and "She-Fire: A Safari Into the Human Spirit" (2012), a poetic armchair travel narrative, inspired by her travel to Kenya. Her poems have been widely published, a number have won national awards, and some have been anthologized in a chapbook, "Holding On" (1984).

Mary Jean and Paul spent 40 summers at “Fernwood,” their home in Chautauqua, New York. With Paul’s unwavering support, in 1988 she founded and served as the First Director of the Writer’s Center at Chautauqua Institution.

She received a B.A. in English from Millersville University, was a member of the Academy of American Poets, Poets and Writers, and a Fellow of The Society for The Arts, Religion and Contemporary Culture, based in New York. For several years she taught English Literature at Lancaster Country Day School, and continued to share her love of language by teaching poetry at Willow Valley.

In addition to her husband, Paul, Mary Jean is survived by her son, Mark Irion (Elizabeth), grandchildren: Melissa Markley (Christopher Pratt), Marc Irion (Melissa) and Michael Irion, four great-grandchildren, and two great-great-grandchildren. Her daughter, Lisa Markley, preceded her in death in 1997.

Relatives and friends are invited to attend a Celebration of Life at Lakes Thomas Auditorium, 300 Willow Valley Lakes Drive, Willow Street, PA at 10:00 a.m. on November 6, 2019. Private interment will take place in Chautauqua, New York.

Memorial contributions may be sent in her name to Hospice &Community Care, 685 Good Drive, P.O. Box 4125, Lancaster, PA 17604-4125.

Previous Events

Celebration of Life

NOV 6. 10:00 AM (ET)

Thomas Auditorium at Willow Valley Lakes Manor
300 Willow Valley Lakes Drive
Willow Street, PA 17584
(717) 464-9542

Tribute Wall

BR

“ I treasure the words in an email she wrote to me July 13, 2015.

How I wish I could tell her that I am one who “can’t put the book down”. And, I still reread and love the essay, “Normal Day,” which I cut out of McCall’s magazine in September 1966. It was then called “Let Me Hold You While I May.”

“Dear Beverly,

....

If you have forgotten by this time what it was all about, let me tell you that you were thanking me for my old essay, "Normal Day," which had joined the two of us (and, in fact, many, many other readers I have heard from) in an unforgettable bond that must have led you into the big, long, rather difficult adventure of SHE-FIRE. A Safari Into the Human Spirit with Trafford as our only accessible intermediary. Reaching out to grab that connecting possibility with the arm of one determined not to fall into the loneliness of silence, you wrote that note of appreciation, which then picked me up out of whatever mope may have been yawning darkly, waiting for me to fall into it, and lifted me up, up, high up into the delightful exaltation of (at worst) some cloudlike writers' ego or (at best) the joy of all joys that comes with the exercise of language when it makes strangers into friends.

So, by this time, this friend is wondering whether you were one of those safarists who started SHE-FIRE and "couldn't put it down," (that friend was a non-reader, a self-described deliberate anti-intellectual)— or as one highly-intellectual friend said, "I don't want to finish the last few pages, because then the experience will be over,"— or whether you are one of the many who, in fact, put the book down fairly soon, bored with the whole business of metaphoric searching.

....

*With love,
Mary Jean Irion”*

Beverly Read - October 03, 2025 at 12:44 AM



“ *Mary Jean Irion*

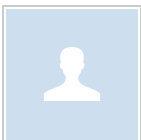
October 22, 2023 at 11:34 PM



“ *I grew up on Kready Avenue and was a friend of Mrs. Irion's daughter, Lisa. Throughout my "growing up years" I spent about as much time at the Irions as I did at my own home. Mrs. Irion's kindness and compassion knew no limits - be it the annoying neighborhood kid (me) who showed up for visits even when Lisa wasn't home, or the tiny wild baby bunnies who needed around-the-clock nurturing in order to survive, or anyone who needed comfort, a shoulder to cry on, or an ear to listen. One of my proudest moments was when Mrs. Irion added a picture of Lisa and me to the door pane's "picture wall." I regret that I lost touch but I have thought about Mrs. Irion through the years - each time bringing a smile to my face and a warmth to my heart. She was a truly wonderful and gracious lady - the soul of a poet and the heart of a mother. May she dance with the angels (and with Lisa)!*

Wendy (Campbell) Nelson

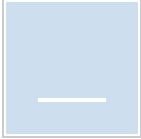
Wendy Nelson - November 05, 2019 at 10:01 PM



“ *Delightful Dieffenbachia was purchased for the family of Mary Jean Irion.*



November 04, 2019 at 01:49 AM



“ *__Allen purchased the Love Everlasting Bouquet for the family of Mary Jean Irion.*



__Allen - November 04, 2019 at 01:18 AM



“ *Mary Jean was my English teacher at Lancaster Country Day School, and her passion, intelligence, depth of learning, and genuine love for language were passed on to all of us. Though I have not seen her in many years, her spirit always stayed with me, and I often heard her lovely voice in my ear as I read a particularly tough passage of prose or poetry. Thank you for that gift, Mrs. Irion. May her family take comfort knowing that her spirit lives on in so many she has touched.*

Melissa Byers - October 20, 2019 at 02:59 PM



Mary Jean carried her light with her wherever she went. I met her through her work at The Writers' Center at Chautauqua. She first enlisted my help to create weekly posters for the Kiosks, and later in planning Writers' Day. Her joy, knowledge and passion for writing was evident. She encouraged me as novice writer and opened my eyes to teachers and genres of writing I wouldn't have explored on my own. I lost contact with her when she and Paul sold Fernwood, but I will be forever grateful for her mentor ship and friendship. My sincere condolences are with you all. Valerie Foster

Valerie Foster - October 22, 2019 at 11:45 AM



Thank you for the kind words Valerie

Michael Irion - November 04, 2019 at 07:59 AM