

Eugenia Butler Jackson Vogel

November 15, 1932 ~ December 7, 2024

Growing up in Nashville, Tenn., Gene Jackson's childhood dream was to spend her life in the Rocky Mountain West. She achieved that dream by marrying a Presbyterian pastor called to serve a mission—Ganado Presbyterian Church—on the Navajo reservation in 1954. What was then a bold and gutsy move across the country with a newborn started a lifelong legacy of bravery and service.

Eugenia Butler Jackson was born Nov. 15, 1932, in Nashville to Keener Harrison Jackson and Martha Virginia McPherson Jackson, the second of three children. Gene died peacefully the morning of Dec. 7, 2024, under hospice care at University of Utah Hospital in Salt Lake City.

Gene grew up at Hillsboro Presbyterian Church in Nashville, where as a university student she met her future husband, George William Vogel Jr., who was serving as an associate pastor. Gene transferred from Vanderbilt University to Maryville College in Maryville, Tenn., when Bill moved there to pastor New Providence Presbyterian Church. Bill and Gene married in 1953, and in 1954, Gene was one of the first married and pregnant students to graduate from Maryville College with a bachelor's degree in English.

Later that year, Bill and Gene moved with their new baby daughter to Ganado, Ariz. Three more children were born at the tiny hospital at the Presbyterian mission, and Gene spent her time raising her children, supporting her husband's ministry, and forging friendships that endured a lifetime.

Gene and Bill moved to Winslow, Ariz., and then to Phoenix, where they adopted their fifth child, a 5-year-old boy from South Korea in 1967. As their children grew up, Gene continued to support Bill's ministries, and they moved away from their beloved Arizona to a pastoral call in Bellevue, Neb., in 1978.

Grandchildren began to be born, their youngest son graduated from high school, and one of their daughters started studying to become a Presbyterian pastor and follow a calling to El Salvador. Gene began to do volunteer and administrative work for the Sanctuary movement serving Central American refugees. Then in 1984, Bill suddenly died of a heart attack. Gene, at age 51, spent a year discerning what to do while living with her mother-in-law in Bellevue.

Then she decided to do another brave thing and return to Phoenix alone to begin her own professional life. Gene joined Orangewood Presbyterian Church in Phoenix, where she was ordained as a ruling elder, and she began developing and implementing a ministry to spouses of clergy in the Presbytery of Grand Canyon, a program she ran until she retired in 1997. Gene also worked as an administrator for various refugee ministries, for Churches Opposed to Undercover Government Activities in Religion, which successfully sued the federal government in 1986, and as director of the Phoenix Sanctuary Defense Fund, which assisted clergy and other religious workers charged with crimes related to their support of people displaced by armed conflicts in Central America.

Amid this burgeoning professional life, Gene was a stalwart for her family through births, deaths, adoptions, coming out, divorces, and all kinds of professional and personal crises and achievements. She never lost touch with friends across the world; her long-distance phone bill was notoriously extensive until she learned to email and use a cell phone.

Gene traveled to El Salvador during that country's armed conflict in the 1980s for the wedding of her daughter and again after the births of two grandchildren there. She traveled to Venezuela, where another daughter lived, and trailed her fingers in the Orinoco River. She visited Italy and Switzerland to celebrate her 70th birthday. In 2014, Gene moved to Salt Lake City to live with her oldest daughter and son-in-law, and she joined Wasatch Presbyterian Church.

In Salt Lake City, Gene carried on with her practice of forming friendships and connections. She was given the task of writing and mailing welcome notes to new members at Wasatch Presbyterian. Gene presented her husband's pastoral stole to a granddaughter being ordained as a Presbyterian pastor. In September of this year, she recovered from a fall that broke four ribs to make the trip to Oregon for the wedding of a grandson.

Gene's older brother, Keener Harrison Jackson Jr., died in 1950. Gene is survived by her younger sister, Martha Virginia McCutchen of Heath, Mass., her five children, Virginia (Lawrence Hjalmarson) of Salt Lake City, Utah, Dorothy (John France) of Tonto Basin, Ariz., Leslie of Guatemala, Paul (Angie Dobrowski) of Beaverton, Ore., James Park (Mary Jo Ferris Vogel) of Castle Pines, Colo., her 11 grandchildren, 7 great-grandchildren, and 3 great-great-grandchildren, the youngest of whom was born the morning of Dec. 7, an hour after Gene breathed her last.

A public memorial service will be held 10 a.m. Saturday, Dec. 21, 2024, at Wasatch Presbyterian Church, 1626 S 1700 E, Salt Lake City. A private interment will take place next year in Ganado, Ariz., where Gene's husband Bill was buried nearly 40 years ago.

If you would like to honor Gene's lifelong commitment to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), consider donating to the church's Board of Pensions Assistance Program, which provides grants to help active and retired ministers and their families in times of need. https://www.pensions.org/your-path-to-wholeness/assistance-program/giving