

# Mary Ellen Thomas

*May 20, 1967 ~ October 3, 2023*

Mary Ellen Thomas, 56, died on Oct. 3, 2023, surrounded by her family, after a valiant struggle with metastatic breast cancer and Wilson's Disease. While we are devastated by our tremendous loss, we are grateful for having known and loved such a remarkable person. We will miss Mary's free spirit, her empathy for others, her gentleness, her ability to tell stories and create a magical world, her toughness, her stoicism, and her brave heart.

The youngest of eight, Mary was born May 20, 1967, to Winifred and Owen Thomas in Bartlesville, OK. In 1979, the family relocated to Salt Lake City, UT. Mary attended Judge Memorial High School, graduating in 1985. At the University of Utah, she earned bachelor's degrees in both English and History. Later, Mary returned to school, obtaining her master's in education and certifications in teaching and ESL. A lifelong learner, Mary was finishing a second Master's degree in creative writing at Weber State at the time of her death.

Mary was employed by the Granite School District, teaching English at Cottonwood High School for the last 7 years. Previously, Mary taught at Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Joseph High School. For many years, Mary worked as a health unit coordinator in LDS Hospital's thoracic unit and in Primary Children's emergency room.

Mary was a dreamer and even as a preschooler she was electrified by horses. She frequently played with her plastic horses and longed to ride one. Finally, at age 11, she got her first horse, Billy Bob Randall, a quarter horse, who was the same age she was. She rode him in the Christmas parade in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. He was groomed to perfection and he felt special. He pranced in the parade, much to Mary's delight. Billy moved to Utah with Mary in 1979. Mary had a series of beloved horses who lived to old age.

After Mary was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent treatment 6 years ago, she acquired Greta, a beautiful and spirited former racehorse. Greta was joy and life to Mary. She loved to let Greta out in a large arena to run for the beauty and thrill of running. With her tail held high and her head up, Greta and Mary shared their exhilaration. For Mary, interacting with horses, in all their magnificence, was a spiritual experience. In addition to her horses, Mary loved and cared for many animals over the years, including beloved dogs Jasmine and Boots, and most recently, a poodle puppy named Jasper.

A very quiet, private person, Mary expressed her emotions in her music and often played for her mother. She was an accomplished pianist and taught piano lessons to students for many years. Teaching piano was how she discovered her love of teaching. She found great meaning and satisfaction in seeing her students experience what she did playing music.

Another love of Mary's was written language. She was someone for whom reading was a major dimension of her life. She wanted to share with her students what she found so beautiful: to move into another's mind and heart and experience life through them, to realize that our individual struggles are universal and a part of the shared human

experience. She often engaged students in imaginative ways with art and history and asked them to imagine themselves inside stories like she did.

In April of this year when Mary's health began to fail, she continued to prioritize leading her seniors and other students to the end of a successful school year. Not until all the papers were graded and grades were submitted did she turn her attention to her growing health crisis. By June 8th, she was in the hospital in critical condition.

Mary was preceded in death by her parents and brothers, David and Robert. David died at 22 years old of Wilson's Disease, a recessive genetic condition affecting copper metabolism. Without treatment it is uniformly fatal. Until David died, no one in the family knew about Wilson's Disease.

Mary was very close to David. He often played with Mary when she was a small child and pretended to be her horse "Fred." When he was hospitalized after becoming very ill, he explained to her that his IVs were "Fred's oats."

Within months of David's death, Mary also was diagnosed with Wilson's Disease and began treatment. Mary adored David and she was profoundly affected by his death. It started her on an inward journey to understand what we experience in life. She read widely in literature and became a reflective person who was passionate about social justice and cared about the suffering in the world. She was a person of great kindness who gave generously to other people.

The family wishes to thank Dr. James Shortridge, who provided compassionate care for Mary throughout her six years of treatment for breast cancer, Dr. Alisa Knowlton, her longtime physician, Dr. Edward J. Frech, and the doctors and nurses at Holy Cross Hospital Davis and at Intermountain Medical Center.

Survived by sisters: Jann DeWitt (John) and Kathleen Zellner (Robert); brothers: John (Trisha), Paul (Robin), and James (Patty) Thomas; nieces and nephews: Mariam (John Boyle) and Ayan Farah, Ryan, Emily (Carey), Wiley, Kathryn, Samuel (Brianna), Lydia, Eva and Johnny Thomas, Anne Zellner Sherwood (Brandon); extended family and friends.

Family and friends are invited to a celebration of life on Saturday, Oct. 14, at 3:00 p.m. with a gathering 1 hour prior at Larkin Mortuary, 260 E. So. Temple, Salt Lake City, UT 84111. To watch the service online through Zoom, please click the "Watch Service" button above.

In lieu of flowers, the family would greatly appreciate donations in Mary's name to the American Wild Horse Campaign, Best Friends Animal Society, or to METAvivor, a nonprofit that funds research of stage IV metastatic breast cancer.