

Verla Jean "VJ" Rieske Smith

March 26, 1947 ~ January 8, 2023

Verla Jean “VJ” Rieske Smith passed away peacefully at home surrounded by her family on January 8, 2023. VJ was a devoted wife, mother, grandmother, sister, daughter, and friend. Her life was marked by service, action, love, faith, and intellectual curiosity. She had a special gift for seeking out those who were overlooked by others and for serving and teaching children. She loved classic literature, good films, and the Beatles. VJ was an active member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She lived her life in a way that reflected her faith in her Savior Jesus Christ.

VJ was born on March 26, 1947 to Verla Petersen and William “Bill” Marshall Rieske in Malad City, Idaho. She was the oldest of three girls. When VJ was a child, the family moved to Salt Lake City, Utah, where her father established an unconventional family business featuring various agricultural and entertainment exhibits around the U.S. and Canadian fair circuits. These included Laddie, the world’s largest horse! VJ enjoyed telling stories about her adventures on the road with her family. As a young girl she was named honorary Rodeo Queen at the Calgary Stampede, and performed magic tricks on TV as Verla Jean the Magical Miss. VJ later attended West High School where she competed on the trampoline team.

VJ excelled in school and devoted her time to learning all she could, even while taking care of her two sisters as her parents traveled for work. She was the first in her family to attend college. She loved her time at the University of Utah where she was active in campus service organizations and in Lambda Delta Sigma sorority leadership.

While at the University, VJ met her sweetheart Douglas Cannon Smith. They were married on June 12, 1970 in the Salt Lake City Temple. Upon graduation with a B.A. in Political Science, VJ took a job teaching middle school social studies and drama. After Doug finished law school, he joined the Army, which allowed them to live in a variety of interesting places. They enjoyed their time in Panama where they served among the native Kuna (Guna) people. They also lived in Kansas, Georgia, Virginia, and finally El Paso, Texas, where they made their home for 43 years. They loved living on the border.

During their early years of marriage, they welcomed five children: Maren, Rachel, Amber, Spencer, & Hayley. VJ’s children were the center of her world. She made sure they had opportunities to learn, swim, study music, and play sports. VJ also served as the Lambda Delta Sigma advisor for a beloved group of college girls in El Paso. Those girls have grown up and become dear friends. VJ found great joy serving the children and youth at Church and in the community through the years.

As VJ’s children grew older, VJ returned to school to receive her library certificate and took a position as the librarian at Pebble Hills Elementary School. She took great pride in her beautiful library. Children’s books and story time for the little ones were her passion. She absolutely loved her students, and she was named Librarian of Year

for the district. As the years passed, VJ turned her story time skills towards her grandchildren, who were fortunate to receive books for birthdays and Christmas. She also visited Portugal, Spain, Morocco, Israel, Mexico, and England with her children. Visiting Jane Austen's cottage was a sacred experience. She and Doug loved frequenting the temple in Ciudad Juarez just over the border from her beloved El Paso.

VJ and Doug moved to Chandler, Arizona in 2021 to be closer to family. During her last few years, she demonstrated incredible grit and tenacity as she faced many health challenges. She never let them get in the way of spending time with her family. Her faith in Jesus Christ was a source of great strength.

VJ is survived by her best friend and husband Douglas Smith; her sisters Kathy Gailey (Kent) of South Jordan, Utah; Brenda Fox of Sandy, Utah; her five children Maren Butcher (Trent) of Chandler, Arizona; Rachel Anderson (Jonas) of Eugene, Oregon; Amber Wilson (Dan) of Pearland, Texas; Spencer Smith of Salt Lake City, Utah; Hayley Smith (Celine Bjerga) of Chandler, Arizona; her nine grandchildren Hannah Butcher Blaylock (Tanner), Eliza Butcher, William Butcher, Joshua Butcher, Ramsey Anderson, Felicity Anderson, Calvin Anderson, JD Wilson, and Brooke Wilson; and numerous nieces and nephews. VJ was preceded in death by her parents, and two grandchildren: Abigail Anderson, and John Cannon Wilson.

Services will be held on Saturday, January 14 at the Grove Chapel of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints located at 3770 S Cooper Rd, Chandler, AZ 85249. The viewing will be held from 10am-11am, with a funeral following at 11:30am.

The funeral will be streamed at 11:30am MST: tinyurl.com/vjsmith2023.

Interment will be at the Salt Lake City Cemetery (200 N St, Salt Lake City, UT 84103). A graveside service will be held on Saturday, January 21 at 11am. An open house will follow at noon at the LDS meetinghouse located at 951 E 100 S, Salt Lake City, UT.

In lieu of flowers, friends are invited to contribute to a special fund at Lifting Hands International that has been created in VJ's honor. The funds will be used to develop a library for refugees and displaced people in Moldova and Ukraine. You can learn more about this project and donate funds here: https://www.liftinghandsinternational.org/ukraine-storytime.