

Children's advocate Claudia Harrison dies at 64

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Claudia Harrison, a children's advocate who helped found First 5 Ventura County, has died.

Harrison, 64, died of cancer Saturday at her home in Ojai, surrounded by friends and family.

"She was such a visionary leader in our county," said friend and colleague Petra Puls. "She was relentless in fighting for what was right for children and families. She would not give up."

First 5 Ventura County develops programs for children from birth to age 5 and their families. The organization's focus includes health, literacy and quality childcare. Harrison was executive director.



Harrison

Before she died, Harrison asked that people carry on her legacy by reading with children every day. Her friends are celebrating her memory by taking five minutes to read to a child.

"She loved reading," Puls said. "Early literacy was one of her many passions. She really felt like we could change the world by reading to a child."

Harrison also enjoyed cooking, poetry and traveling, particularly to Central and South America, Puls said.

Over the last few years, Harrison, who was fluent in Spanish, traveled to Guatemala to help provide dentistry to indigenous people.

"Even then, she would find a way to talk to moms about talking and reading and singing with kids," Puls said.

Harrison also traveled to learn, especially about other cultures, said Bruce Stenslie, president and CEO of the Economic Development Collaborative,

Ventura County.

At one point, she apprenticed herself to a family of master weavers on the Navajo reservation, said Stenslie, who serves on the First 5 commission.

"She didn't just look at the blankets and collect them," he said. "She got herself a loom and taught herself to weave."

Whatever she did, she was "very present," said Carola Matera, a professor of early childhood education at CSU Channel Islands.

"She looked you in the eye," said Matera, another commission member. "You knew she was seeing you. ... She listened to what everybody said. And they were all important."

Harrison also had a commanding presence, Matera said.

"She was always very polished, very put together — sophisticated," Matera said. "She was someone you looked at

and said 'Oooh.' She wasn't tall, but she had that presence. ... She loved red."

Before joining First Five, Harrison worked in health care in Mexico, consulted for the Department of Health in Massachusetts and was a director at Blue Cross. She earned her bachelor's degree at Tufts University in Massachusetts and her MBA at Boston College.

Harrison is survived by her son, Connor Smith, 20, a student at Ventura College; brother, Charlie; and mother, Marge. Her late husband, Mike Smith, also died of cancer.

A memorial service is planned for 12:30 p.m. Thursday at Temple Beth Torah, 7620 Foothill Road, Ventura. Instead of flowers, friends ask that people make a donation in her memory to support her son or Camp Kesem, which supports children when their parents have cancer.

How community leader showed the power of one



CASON POINT
COLLEEN CASON

Claudia Harrison was one little person. By little, I mean she stood short in physical stature.

But because she always seemed to put others first, a standing-room-only crowd turned out to pay their respects to her on Thursday at Temple Beth Torah in Ventura.

A founder of First 5 Ventura County, Harrison died of cancer late last month. She was 64 years old and is survived by her 20-year-old son, Connor.

Harrison died too young — way too young. In every row of the sanctuary at



Harrison

any given time during the service, folks mopped tears from their cheeks. Harrison was vertically challenged, yes, but it would be the rare person who did not look up to her.

As Rabbi Lisa Hochberg-Miller noted, Harrison's potential to serve the community was far from exhausted at the time of her passing. To be human, she said, is to live in a state of discord. And our discord arises from the sad reality we are here and she left us too soon.

"There is no squaring that truth," the rabbi said.

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And I thought about the moment of truth that stands before us on Tuesday. After all the political rancor, many voters could feel too turned off to even show up at the polls. I've been on this planet for longer than I will admit, and I recall few election cycles as contentious — not only at the top of the ticket but locally in the allegations lobbed back and forth in both the 3rd District supervisor race and the dueling growth-control measures, C and F.

For those who might consider staying away from the polls, thinking one person cannot make a difference, consider the life of Claudia Harrison.

Her most visible mission was launched at the ballot box in 1998. Proposition 10 levied a 50-cents-a-pack tax on

cigarettes to fund early childhood education.

The measure barely passed under strong opposition from Big Tobacco. I, too, opposed it. Prop. 10 struck me as lawmaking by nonsequitur. Taxing smokers to fund programs for little kids was like putting a surcharge on Big Gulps to save Mono Lake. To me, it made more sense to levy a cigarette tax to support research to help people break their nicotine addiction.

So as you might imagine, I held a dim view of what would eventually become known as First 5 Ventura County. Harrison was tapped as its first executive director in July 2000.

"She was the ringleader," current First 5 commissioner Bruce Stenslie told mourners.

Harrison began contributing regular articles to this newspaper, offering pithy and practical tips on reading, teaching, birthing and being present for your kids. She was like the rare room mother who

could offer unsolicited advice nobody requested.

Then I met her in person. When she spoke to me, I felt like I was the only person in the room. When we talked, I sensed such warmth from her I thought I've done nothing to deserve the friendship of this good woman.

She was a free-range talker. A foodie, a dancer, a traveler, she went all in on anything that affirmed life.

Like a magnet, she always sought connection.

"It was always about networking and connecting," said Stenslie, president and CEO of the Economic Development Collaborative — Ventura County. "She knew our care for children is care for community, and there is no better way to care for our world."

As First 5 gained traction and preschool opportunities opened up to thousands of kids across the county, my initial skepticism faded.

In 2009, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation

named First 5 Ventura County to its honor roll of exemplary programs.

That same year, Harrison lost her husband, Mike Smith, to cancer.

Still, "her pace never wavered," her brother Charlie told mourners. "She never did anything halfway," he said.

An observant Jew, she died at her Ojai home on a Sabbath morning.

After the service, we gathered in the lobby. Many who knew her far better than I shared their stories of the optimism that defined her. When circumstances were less than ideal and others were inclined to walk away, Harrison reminded them that is the time to make a stand to change things for the better.

She didn't win every fight. No one does, but how she lived demonstrates the towering potential of one little person who shows up.

Email Colleen Cason at casonpoint101@gmail.com.

President's Message

Dear Friends,

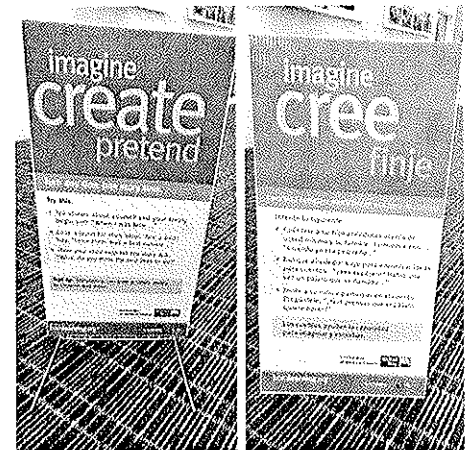
Claudia Harrison, founding director of First 5 Ventura County, recently lost her battle with cancer. Claudia was a champion for children and families and that passion was a fit with the Community Impact work of United Way of Ventura County.



So it made perfect sense that Claudia and First 5 partnered with United Way to improve lives through health, education, and financial stability. Claudia was also a strong advocate for 2-1-1. Today, First 5 continues as a significant partner in funding that service. Claudia joined the United Way Income Focus Team in 2007 and was selected by the members to serve as the team's chair, a position she held for nine years.

United Way's Born Learning Trail was of special interest to her. Today, as a result of our partnership, there are six trails across Ventura County.

Following Ventura County's Children's Oral Health Summit in 2013, Claudia joined in the planning for our community's collective response to addressing gaps in services and barriers to oral health care for children, which led to the Building Healthy Smiles Initiative.



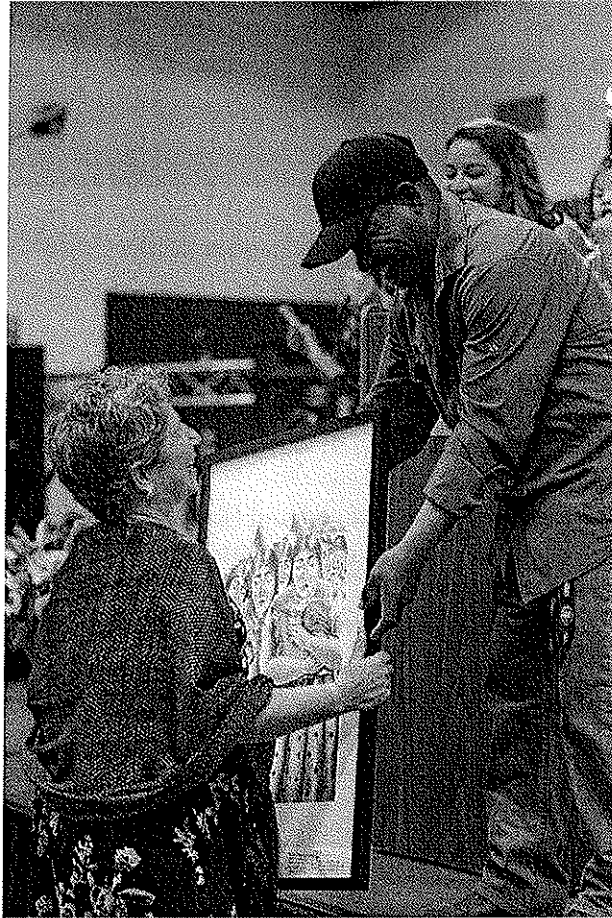
Claudia was a key strategic partner and member of the Community Impact Council. She was instrumental in helping the Council develop Guiding Principles for United Way activities and investments, a guide we continue to use today.

Claudia was a respected leader both locally and statewide. She influenced those in all sectors--business, education, government, and the non-profit community. United Way is privileged to have worked closely with Claudia and we honor her for the impact she made in our community.

To make a gift in memory of Claudia, please visit <https://www.gofundme.com/in-memory-of-claudia-harrison>.

Eric Harrison
President & CEO
United Way of Ventura County





Claudia Harrison wins artwork in the 2014 Night in Oaxaca raffle

We at MICOP are heartbroken with the news of Claudia Harrison's passing this last Friday. Claudia was one of MICOP's biggest fans and a longtime partner of ours. In 2007 Claudia started one of MICOP's first collaborative contracts to serve the indigenous community in Ventura County. Through the "Puentes" (Bridges) contract, our collaboration with First 5 brought much needed resources and case work to indigenous families with children aged 0-5. Over the years our Puentes contract continued to grow providing case work for families enrolling their children for preschool and kindergarten, Healthy Baby and Learning with Mom and Dad classes. Most of our Puentes team have been with us since the beginning of this contract and they forged lasting relationships with Claudia. All of this has been possible because she trusted us to do the work that needed to be done to bring education and early literacy to the under-served communities in Ventura County.

In 2015 we asked Claudia to be our keynote speaker at our annual fundraiser, Night in Oaxaca. She accepted with glee, and we were as excited as she was to have her talk about MICOP and her relationship to us. We cherish the memory of having her recount her feelings about MICOP and the relationship between MICOP and First 5.

Losing Claudia has left a deep sadness in all of our hearts. Her warmth and compassion was evident in all that she did. We feel extremely blessed to have been lucky enough to work with her and we share our grief with her friends, co-workers and family.

In Claudia's speech at Night in Oaxaca she thanked us,

"For sharing and teaching us

For your dedication, strength and creativity

For being so successful in supporting families and giving children the best start in life!

And for making Ventura County a better place!"

Claudia's own words express exactly how we feel about her work. Claudia possessed an amazing spirit that touched us all and she will never be forgotten!

With love and respect,

The MICOP Team