

Karen Niles

SEPTEMBER 7, 1945 – MARCH 4, 2025



IN THE CARE OF

[H.P. BRANDT FUNERAL HOME](#)

Although she often claimed to be part dog, Karen Niles actually was just a person made of pure heart. The boundless love she gave to canines and humans alike in the course of her 79 years was returned in spades to support and comfort her at the end of her life. She died peacefully at her new home in Bridgeville, Penn., on Tuesday, March 4, 2025, following a brief experience with cancer.

Karen Louise Thompson — called “Susie” by her sister in Ohio and every Buckeye who knew her — was born September 7, 1945, in Orange, N.J. She grew up in Chatham, N.J., graduating from Chatham High School, class of 1963. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree at Westminster College in New Wilmington, Penn., where she met her future husband, Herb Niles of Duke Center, Penn. The two married in 1967 and soon settled — for a short while — in Greensburg, Penn., where they started a family that went on to grow in unexpected ways for many years to come. Along the way, Karen also earned a master’s degree in education from California University at Pennsylvania. As Herb progressed in his career, Karen prioritized family through several moves up and down the East Coast. She made a science of packing and unpacking, and an art of turning every new house into a home.



Karen served for 24 years as vice-president of Niles & Associates, a corporate recruiting firm she and Herb founded in 1995. Karen also thought she might have enjoyed being a marine biologist: She wasn't crazy about swimming, yet she was captivated by the ocean and loved collecting seashells, which adorned every room in the house. She also might have made a great electrical engineer, as she was known for occasionally re-wiring lights to suit the needs of her family. And if her success raising eight family dogs — several of them rescues — is any indication, perhaps she could have been an animal trainer, too.

Outside these considerable contributions to work, family and home, Karen also gave herself wholeheartedly as a volunteer for two causes: pet therapy and mental health. Karen and six family dogs brought comfort to countless people of all ages at Orangewood Children and Family Center, psychiatric hospitals, nursing homes and libraries throughout Southern California, where Karen and Herb had relocated in 1993. These visits filled her heart, as did 27 years teaching family support classes for the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Having taken a NAMI course as a student, Karen was quickly recruited as a class teacher. She then went on to not only train new teachers, but also to train police and other first responders on how to de-escalate incidents involving mental health crises. This work no doubt helped, and possibly even saved, countless lives in her community.

In 2024, Karen and Herb returned to their roots in Pittsburgh to be closer to family, including Karen's beloved sister and her extended family in Ohio. Their warm embraces outweighed the biting cold of her first winter back in Pennsylvania. Karen and Herb spent a year in Green Tree, then relocated to Chartiers Bend Retirement Resort in Bridgeville just as she was entering hospice care. (Apparently, she had to sneak in just one more relocation.) Karen's insistence on rushing that final move proved prescient — a prescience entirely on point with the resourcefulness that defined her. She will be remembered for her boundless energy, intrepid organizational skills, quick wit, indomitable optimism and feistiness, and limitless kindness.

Karen is predeceased by her mother and father, Dorothy and Samuel Ernest Thompson, of Chatham, N.J. She is survived by her husband, Herbert Morris Niles; sister Dianne (James) Heller of Dover, Ohio, and their family; Stacey (Scott) Fitzpatrick of Costa Mesa, Calif.; Hilary Niles of Portsmouth, N.H.; Laura Hill of Harrisburg, Penn., and her family; Nicolò Da Rin of Padua, Italy; Ricardo (Simone) Giovannetti and their family of Sao Paulo, Brazil; and Piper, who is a dream dog.

The family wishes to thank the kind souls from OSPTA Hospice who gave such tender care to Karen in her final days, as well as the staff at UPMC Mercy Hospital in Pittsburgh and Guanajuato General Hospital in México, where she first learned of her illness. Gratitude also goes to staff and students at the University of

Pittsburgh Medical School, where Karen has donated her body to science. True to fashion, her final act is one of generosity and education.

In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions can be made to Orange County Animal Allies or NAMI Orange County. Celebrations of Karen's life, which she was committed to living so robustly, will be held April 12 at Geib Funeral Center in Dover, Ohio; and May 31 at the home of Scott and Stacey Fitzpatrick in Orange County, Calif. Woof!