

Helen "Mickey" Marie (Baetke) Rizzi

December 10, 1924 ~ June 1, 2023 (age 98)



Helen Marie Rizzi, who everyone knew as Mickey, passed away on the afternoon of June 1, 2023, at the age of 98, at Kirkland Crossing in Pewaukee, WI, where she had been staying since Easter 2022. She was surrounded by those who loved her. For almost 60 years, she had been a beloved resident of Eau Claire, living for most of that time on Drummond Street in the Third Ward, in a house she and her husband built. Mickey had an unlimited capacity for love that she shared with those around her and was extraordinarily

warm, kind and strong, with a commitment to others that was an inspiration to all who knew her.

Mickey leaves her two children, Jane Rizzi Stromwall, of Summit, WI, and Robert Arthur (Bob) Rizzi, of Bethesda, MD, together with six grandsons and one granddaughter, and nine great grandchildren. She was predeceased by her husband of 69 years, Arthur Francis (Art) Rizzi, who died on June 2, 2016. She was a member of Grace Lutheran Church for almost 60 years.

Mickey was part of the Greatest Generation. She was born on December 10, 1924, in San Antonio, TX, where her father, August P. Baetke, was pastor at St. John's Lutheran Church. Her mother died when she was young, and she was raised with her cousins in Fond du Lac, WI, and graduated from Fond du Lac High School. She attended Wartburg College in Waverly, IA, receiving a bachelor's degree in social work in 1946. She earned some of her undergraduate credits at the University of Wisconsin, where Art was also a student. She later received a Master's degree in vocational rehabilitation from the University of Wisconsin campus in Menomonie (Stout). Among other positions she held was as an instructor at the Chippewa Valley Technical College in Eau Claire, teaching communications for the deaf. She was always generous with her time, and active in so many forms of outreach and providing support to so many others that it is



impossible to list them all. She lived her Christian faith.

For almost her entire life, Mickey was deaf. She demonstrated her strength and resiliency by mastering her handicap and her compassion by showing others how to overcome it. At a young age, she learned to lip read, and many people who interacted with her did not know she was deaf. She later learned American Sign Language (ASL), so that she could better communicate with people in the deaf and hard of hearing community. Her work with that community was one of her principal contributions (in addition to raising two grateful children). She spoke up for other groups facing discrimination and other challenges, including in the Eau Claire community and in her church. Alongside many of her cherished friends who were similarly dedicated to advocacy, she was instrumental in pushing the state of Wisconsin to implement improved telecommunications access for the deaf (including through teletypewriter, or TTY, devices). She played a major role in persuading AT&T to provide free long-distance services to individuals using TTYs, first in Wisconsin, and then nationwide. She lobbied television stations to include closed-captioning in their programming, now commonplace but then a rarity. Later in life, she received formal recognition for some of these efforts. In 2017, she was awarded the "Wisconsin Hero Award" by the First Lady of Wisconsin for her lifetime of advocacy on behalf of the deaf and hard of hearing community. In 2018, she received the Wisconsin "Champions in Women's Health Award" for her work with the deaf community and other work implementing the Americans with Disabilities Act. Many hundreds of hearing-impaired residents of the state were directly helped by her; some were inspired to follow her example and serve that community in their own right.

Mickey was an early adopter of all forms of technology that helped the deaf communicate. She was one of the first people in Wisconsin to get a TTY, and her children kept the devices ready for her calls. Her lifelong dream of a sci-fi "TV Phone" to enable her to speak with her children was realized in her lifetime, and she became an avid FaceTime user. In 2008, Mickey was one of the first deaf persons in Wisconsin to receive a new electronic device, called a cochlear implant, to allow her some hearing. Experimental at the time, it is now commonly in use. While it did not allow her to hear well, for the first time since childhood she could hear music.

While being deaf was an important part of Mickey's life, it did not define her. Her



defining quality was the love she shared with whoever was near her, imparted through her quiet but profound charisma that was evident to those around her. Mickey's love will be remembered by her friends and family forever.

Instead of giving flowers, the family has asked that donations be made in her memory by contributing to her donor advised fund, and by indicating the preferred charity on the donation. The ones that Mickey supported included the Eau Claire Food Bank, the Eau Claire Public Library, Massachusetts Eye and Ear in support of National Temporal Bone Registry, and the Cochlear Implant Awareness Foundation. The address of the donor advised fund is:

Helen and Arthur Rizzi Donor Advised Fund, Waukesha County Community Foundation, 2727 N Grandview Blvd, Suite 301, Waukesha, WI 53188.

A Funeral Service will be held at 1pm on Tuesday July 11, 2023, at Grace Lutheran Church, 202 West Grand Avenue in Eau Claire, with Pastor Dean Simpson officiating. Visitation will be from 4pm - 7pm on Monday July 10, 2023, at Lenmark-Gomsrud-Linn Funeral & Cremation Services, 814 1st Avenue in Eau Claire. Burial will be in Forest Hill Cemetery in Eau Claire.

To express online condolences, please visit www.lenmarkfh.com
To **send flowers** to the family, please **visit our floral store.**