



Shirley Mae Byrne

October 16, 1932 - April 23, 2025

Corvallis has lost a treasure. Shirley Mae Byrne, beloved mother, grandmother, pianist, teacher, birdwatcher, reader, fund-raiser and friend, died Wednesday, April 23, 2025. She took her last breath listening to Schubert's Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 120, which she had played herself, and which she had heard in concert just 10 days prior.

Shirley was born in Southern California to Robert and Edith Elsie O'Connor. An only child, Shirley grew up with extended family nearby and with music always. Her grandfather had played piano for country dances in rural Saskatchewan, and her mother played organ and piano in the family home. Shirley learned to play too, and as a young adult drove two hours round trip to study with Edith Knox, whose piano-teacher lineage traced back to Bach, Mozart, and Clementi. A scholarship enabled Shirley to attend Whittier College and earn a degree in Music plus a teaching certificate.

Pursuing a graduate music degree at USC, Shirley was disconcerted to enter the dining hall and find a table of men staring at her. She chose a seat far away, but not far enough. Soon she was approached by one of the fellows, geology grad student John Byrne. "I can't think of a subtle way to meet you," he said. "Do you mind if I try the direct approach?" She missed her next class. They married in 1954 and were best friends and spouses for more than 69 years. They were engaging and entertaining as individuals, but adorable and

amusing as a couple. They did their part to keep greeting card companies in business.

It was a love story for the ages. Their journey took them first to Houston, Texas, where daughter Donna and then twin daughters Lisa and Karen were born 16 months apart. John and Shirley came to Corvallis in 1960 when the new Department of Oceanography, like their children, was less than two years old. Son Steven was born in Corvallis soon after.

The music world of Corvallis called to Shirley, and even as she and John raised four children, she accompanied music students and performed with Oregon State music faculty and friends. Her adventurous spirit led her into other activities as well. She volunteered as a Camp Fire Girls leader (and taught camp songs to the other leaders). The couple took their four kids skiing, with Shirley twisting around in the front passenger seat to reach back and lace ski boots on small feet in the back seat as John navigated winding roads in the Cascades. Vacations usually involved tent camping, mostly in Oregon, often at the Coast, but also Yellowstone and beyond. When John got a pilot license, Shirley was not to be outdone and she learned to fly as well. In the early 80s, the couple moved to Washington DC while John served as head of NOAA for four years. Shirley taught elementary school music and never stopped playing the piano and performing. Once again in Corvallis at the end of 1984, Shirley --now wife to the OSU president -- dove into both classical music and the support of Oregon State University. Always elegant, with a sparkling sense of humor, she was a formidable fund-raiser – nobody could say no to her. She and John helped found Corvallis OSU Piano International (COPI), which continued to be a favorite cause for the rest of their lives. They were instrumental in selecting the Steinway for the LaSells Stewart Center. She attended a COPI Steinway Series concert shortly before her death and was deeply moved by Garrick Ohlsson's performances of works she herself had played.

Shirley was always also a reader and a birder. She loved to talk about books and authors at book group, at a Library “Random Review,” and around the dinner table. As a lifelong birder, she took great delight in watching birds, most recently on a “birdcam,” the videos from which she would share on Facebook. She kept lists upon lists of when and where she first saw each species. She missed John terribly after he passed in January 2024, but she kept moving forward, teaching piano, performing at piano group, hosting her book group and the local chapter of the Oregon Music Teachers Association, and attending concerts. Her last week was a good one. She met new friends at a Passover seder, attended a concert, went for a short hike to see beaver activity at Bald Hill, enjoyed the wild irises blooming along her driveway, taught piano lessons, dined out, practiced for piano group, and planned to welcome a new piano student. She lived well and fully to the end, succumbing to hemorrhagic stroke at age 92.

Shirley was preceded in death by her husband and best friend, John, and by their daughter, Lisa Kay Barnhardt. She is survived by daughters Donna Byrne and Karen Byrne (Mike Dickey), son Steven Byrne (Holly), and grandchildren Adiv Paradise, Liat Paradise, Lauren Byrne, and Quentin Byrne. To honor Shirley’s memory, the family suggests contributions to Corvallis OSU Piano International (COPI) or OSU Foundation, particularly the following funds:

- Shirley and John Byrne Music Scholarship Endowment Fund
- Shirley and John Byrne Piano Series Endowment Fund
- John and Shirley Byrne College of Earth, Ocean, and Atmospheric Sciences (CEOAS) Endowment Fund
- John and Shirley Byrne OSU Library Support Endowment Fund

A celebration of Shirley’s life will take place May 31, 2025, at 2 p.m. at the First Congregational Church, 4515 SW West Hills Rd, Corvallis, OR 97333.

Previous Events

Celebration of Life

MAY 31. 2:00 PM - 4:00 PM (PT)

First Congregational United Church of Christ
4515 SW West Hills Road
Corvallis, OR 97333

Tribute Wall

MM

“ It was just a few days ago that I learned of Shirley's passing and it saddens me as it does so many others. I only began to know Shirley just over a year ago when I called her, hoping to take piano lessons with her. Unfortunately, I was only able to take lessons from her for a few months because life insisted that I had to focus on other priorities. Still, I was hoping to contact her this summer to begin lessons again, and I was looking forward to showing her a book of familiar songs with accompanying art work that I thought she would appreciate. I really enjoyed Shirley as a person - we even shared some reading ideas. Also, she shared some music with me that I truly enjoy and would likely never have found otherwise. And, of course, she helped me improve my playing in ways that stay with me as I have time again for the piano. A wonderful person and I'm so glad to have spent some time with her.

Mary Mayfield - June 17, 2025 at 07:44 PM

JB

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Jim B. - May 05, 2025 at 01:35 PM

MA

So beautiful.

Marcy Anhaltzer - May 06, 2025 at 04:15 AM