Nathan, Pearl
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Pearl Nathan, longtime volunteer at RISD Museum, dies at 103

The mother of cookbook author Joan Nathan was a R.I. celebrity, known for her zest for life


Nathan

By Donita Naylor
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PROVIDENCE — Pearl Nathan, 103, who volunteered for 70 years at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum and for whom the museum's Café Pearl is named, died early Monday, her family said.

She had taken a walk Sunday with her daughter, cookbook author and food writer Joan Nathan, 74, who is visiting from Washington, D.C., and they stopped in at Café Pearl for lunch.

"Every guard greeted her," the author wrote to friends in an email saying her mother had died in her sleep about 3:30 a.m. at her home in Tockwotton on the Waterfront in East Providence.

The former Pearl Gluck was born in 1913 in New York City to parents who operated Kops, a dress and hat store on Madison Avenue at 55th Street. She graduated from Barnard College in 1934 and married chemical engineer Ernest Nathan in 1937.

Alan Nathan, 76, of Barrington, the oldest of their three children, said Monday from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where he is skiing with his children and grandchildren, that his parents met in New York's Catskill Mountains, where hotels would arrange "the 1930s version of online dating."

Joan Nathan wrote in a New York Times piece in 2003 that when her mother was about 50, her father's business took a downturn and Mrs. Nathan began teaching English at Barrington High School, where she became head of the English Department.

In 2008, she received the Knowledge is Power Award for her work with Volunteers in Providence Schools.

RISD Museum Director John Smith said Monday that he ran into Mrs. Nathan and her daughter in the cafe on Sunday. "Pearl was her usual lively and lovely self," he said.

"It's astonishing when you encounter someone with her zest for life," he said.

When he was born in 1959, Smith said Monday afternoon, Mrs. Nathan was a museum docent, "leading hundreds of schoolchildren through the gallery and getting them excited about art."

"It was truly an honor to have known her," said cookbook author Ellen Brown, the founding food editor of USA Today and the Providence Journal's Smart Cooking columnist.

Brown said that although cooking was not Mrs. Nathan's strong suit, she enjoyed great food and a cocktail. "She had five generations of friends," Brown said. "Even at 103, she was really a force."

Mrs. Nathan and Dorothy Licht, the widow of former Gov. Frank Licht, appeared together in a Jewish cooking series on PBS, but in 2001, she told then-Journal Food Editor Donna Lee, "I'm not known as a cook. The only time anyone talks about my cooking is because I'm Joan Nathan's mother."

Richard Nathan, 69, of Bristol, R.I., and Italy, is Mrs. Nathan's younger son, and her funeral at Temple Beth-El in Providence will be delayed until 11 a.m. Friday to allow Richard time to return from Italy, Joan Nathan said. She said her mother had asked Rabbi Emeritus Leslie Gutterman to officiate at her funeral.

Sugarman Sinai Memorial Chapel is handling arrangements.

She also leaves six grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

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NATHAN, PEARL (GLUCK) 103, passed away Monday, February 20, 2017. The wife of the late Ernest Nathan; she was born in New York City, the daughter of the late Henry and Martha (Kopps) Gluck, graduated from Barnard College, class of 1934, and married the late Ernest Nathan in 1937.

From 1963 to 1973, she taught English at Barrington High School, was active in Inspiring Minds, was a docent and volunteer for RISD for over 62 years and was appointed by Senator Pell to the first Rhode Island Commission for the Arts.

She is survived by her children Alan Nathan and his wife Virginia, Richard Nathan and his wife Ilse, and Joan Nathan and her husband Allan Gerson; grandchildren Jeffrey Nathan and his wife Jessica; Rob Nathan, Sarah Nathan Sullivan and her husband Sean, Daniela Gerson and her wife Talia Inlender, Merissa Gerson, and David Gerson; and great-grandchildren Alia, Asher, Effie, and Fischer Nathan and Charles and Molly Sullivan.

Funeral services will be held Friday, February 24th at 11AM, at Temple Beth-El, 70 Orchard Ave, Providence with burial in Sons of Israel and David Cemetery. In lieu of flowers, contributions in her memory may be made to the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, http://support.risd.edu/ or Inspiring Minds, http://inspiringmindsri.org/donate/. Shiva will be held at the home of Alan and Virginia Nathan, Saturday 7-9 PM. For information and condolences, www.SugarmanSinai.com