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# Thousands mourn Bugdanowitz

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Sheila Bugdanowitz, pictured in 2014

Thousands stared in disbelief at the casket in the main sanctuary of Temple Emanuel on Tuesday, Dec. 6. For many, the loss hit too suddenly for tears.

Sheila Bugdanowitz, president and CEO of the Rose Community Foundation since 1998, died unexpectedly on Sunday, Dec. 4, at age 72. There was no warning, no time to prepare.

Friends spoke to friends in hushed tones. The RCF staff huddled in the rear seats. Family members sat in stunned silence.

Rabbi Joe Black slowly approached the *bimah* and began the service no one had foreseen, at least not yet. Not now.

“In his sorrow, Job cried out: G-d has given, G-d has taken away. Blessed be the name of G-d,” he said.

Cantor Elizabeth Sacks chanted Psalms 121, 15 and 23 in Hebrew and read the English translation. Her stirring voice cracked fissures of grief.

In his talk, Black referred to Bugdanowitz as Sheila, as did all the speakers. The exemplary nonprofit leader never lost her genuine personal touch.

“Death can’t sever her life,” he said. “She will not be forgotten. And for all that was good and enduring in her, we offer Sheila the thanks of our hearts.”

Black compared Bugdanowitz to Jacob in the upcoming Torah portion *Vayetze,* in which the patriarch dreams of angels ascending and descending the ladder.

“Like Jacob, Sheila was a dreamer. She cared about people, especially the community. She had a vision of what we could be and should be if only we had the resources.

“Sheila saw promise where others saw despair. She cultivated synergy where others settled for cynicism.”

In the Torah portion, Jacob saw angels “rising up from the earth and climbing the ladder,” he said. “Angels are not always sent from above to do G-d’s work, but from the earth below.

“And sometimes they walk among us.”

Arlene Hirschfeld and Susan Friedman spoke next. “I’ve known Sheila since we met at Shwayder Camp when we were 10,” Hirschfeld said. “She was the most popular camper.”

In school, Bugdanowitz received a perfect score on a standardized test. “Some people thought she cheated, so she took it again,” she said. “And it was perfect.”

Hirschfeld reminisced about “the days when Sheila wore the absolutely cutest skirts her mother made for her; and those perfectly polished saddle shoes. To top it off she had this great hair — and that wave we were all dying for.”

Laughter rang in the sanctuary.

The women married, became mothers and got together regularly to discuss their children. “We would talk about our issues with our kids and try to solve them together,” she said.

“It was no surprise that Sheila came up with the ideas that solved everything!”

Friedman described Bugdanowitz as “the aspirational friend. She was the friend we most wanted to be like, the glue that held the group together, the spirit that lit up the room.”

Both Hirschfeld and Friedman shared a series of amusing anecdotes. When emotions got the better of them, they struggled for composure.

“If Sheila were to have any regrets, I believe it would be the unfinished projects she left behind,” Friedman said, noting that Colorado Gives Day fell on the day of her funeral.

“I encourage you to donate to a cause of your choice,” she said. “Sheila would like that.”

Linda Childears, CEO of the $1.3 billion Daniels Fund, was Bugdanowitz’ close personal friend and colleague.

“Sheila was an outstanding mentor, teacher and confidante,” Childears said.

“And she was one of the most thoughtful and caring individuals I’ve ever known.

“My dear Sheila, I hope you can feel the love that everyone in this room, and this community, has for you,” Childears said.

“In the past day, your colleagues have expressed gratitude and such an outpouring of respect for your loving, positive, profound and humorous style.

“What a gift you have been, to all of us.”

Donald Kortz, who took the helm of RCF when it formed in 1995, said Bugdanowitz’ appointment as president and CEO in 1998 was “an easy transition.

“She became a leader in the nonprofit world,” he said of his good friend, “and was rewarded with praise, honor and excellence.”

Bugdanowitz was adept at listening to and handling constant input designed to “improve” RCF, he nodded.

“Sheila would receive ‘suggestions’ from many people, trying to convince her how to run her organization, with grace, style and a smile. She would respond, ‘The idea is interesting, but maybe a little early and not at this time.

“And without missing a beat, she’d say, ‘Would you consider making a donation to the Rose Foundation?’”

He emphasized her “marvelous and consistent personality, whether she was at the office or at home. Her friends could confide in her without fear of judgment — but confidant she would offer sound advice.

“Sheila was wealthy, because she had all of you.”

Larry Mizel, a friend of Sheila and her husband Rick Bugdanowitz for four decades, reflected on her connection to family, G-d and country.

“Every year, Don [Kortz] and I would take Sheila to one of the annual dinners in town,” Mizel said. “She would always call Rick and ask him if was OK for her to accompany us to one of these dinners. Sheila had a priority. It was her family.”

Bugdanowitz’ religious convictions may not have been “outwardly communicated,” but the Rose Foundation was “a great source of financial support for the broader community, and ours. Sheila always wanted to help her Jewish community.

“She also worked diligently for our city, our state and our country. There wasn’t anything Sheila wasn’t open to.

“We all had a special love for her,” Mizel said. “So Sheila, on behalf of those who have been touched by the special person you were, I just want you to remember that we love you.”

Rabbi Steven Foster’s pride in Sheila Bugdanowitz as a wife, mother, grandmother and communal giant was palpable.

“We often say our task is to make the world a little bit better by our presence,” he said. “But Sheila is an example of someone who *did* make this corner of the world a better place.

“We are here today in such large numbers not only because of the Rose Foundation and the benefits we gain from it. We’re here in great numbers because Sheila made a difference — yes, through philanthropy, but equally through her incredible kindness. She tried to transmit her values. And we’re here because of those values.”

While Bugdanowitz’ abrupt death shocked so many, she would want the living to appreciate every moment with renewed fervor, Foster said.

“I hope that none of us leaves this room without placing in our hearts the commitment to hold our loved ones a little tighter,” he said. “This day reminds us how thin the thread of life really is.”

Foster quoted writer Merrit Malloy’s “Epitaph” in his closing:

When I dieGive what’s left of me awayTo childrenAnd old men that wait to die.And if you need to cry,Cry for your brotherWalking the street beside you.And when you need me,Put your armsAround anyoneAnd give to themWhat you need to give to me . . .

Love doesn’t die.People do.So when all that’s left of meIs love,Give me away.