



Dr. Barbara B. (Ebright) Varenhorst, Ph.D.

June 3, 1928 - February 24, 2021

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With loving family by her side, Dr. Barbara B. (Ebright) Varenhorst, Ph.D. of Portola Valley, slipped peacefully into the arms of her Lord on Tuesday evening, February 23, 2021.

Barbara was born in Omaha, Nebraska on June 4, 1928 to Oak Wood and Mary Louise (Davidson) Ebright.

As the daughter of a Lutheran minister, Barbara grew up in a strong Christian family, shaping her purpose in life and desire to help others. She attended schools in Kansas and Nebraska, graduating from Lincoln High School in 1946. She conducted her undergraduate work at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, graduating in 1950. A fellowship at Syracuse University allowed her to continue her education, and ultimately earn her master's degree in 1952. Required to read extensively about youth counseling and guidance, Barbara attributed the clear vision that she would later develop about peer counseling to her time at Syracuse University. While at Syracuse she would also meet her future husband, Vernon D. Varenhorst.

Barbara and Vern were married in 1953 in Pasadena. They moved to the Palo Alto area, where she began teaching and counseling in the Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD). In 1964, she earned her Ph.D. from Stanford University in Counseling Psychology and returned to PAUSD as a counseling psychologist for two high schools. While there during the early 1970s, Dr. Varenhorst began to recognize that students were looking to their friends and peers, rather than the adults in their lives, when they needed help in decision making or problem solving. This was her inspiration for developing her Peer Counseling curriculum, to train and collaborate with young people to be more effective in helping their peers.

Dr. Varenhorst always felt that the most important aspect of her career was developing the Palo Alto Peer Counseling Program. In the years since, thousands of young people across

the country have been trained in communication skills, human dynamics, and when to seek assistance from caring adults through Peer Helping programs, Peer Ministry, and other programs that came from this original work. Dr. Varenhorst has been acknowledged as the “Mother” of the peer helper movement and a founding member of the National Peer Helpers Association. Her impact has been far reaching and will continue to touch others for years to come.

In addition to her work in the Palo Alto Unified School District, Dr. Varenhorst was a visiting instructor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Stanford University, California Polytechnic State University, San Francisco State University, University of Victoria, and Johns Hopkins University. Her publications were extensive and well-regarded, including the book *Real Friends: Becoming the Friend You'd Like to Have* (1983).

She was especially proud of her roles as Co-Founder and Past President of the National Peer Helpers Association, and held affiliations with the California Association of Peer Programs, the Board of Regents at St. Olaf College, Search Institute, and the College Board. Dr. Varenhorst was also elected to the Vesper Society Board of Directors in 1977. She served there in many leadership positions, including interim president from 1996-1999. Barbara and Vern joined Valley Presbyterian Church in the mid 90's where Barbara served as an Elder, founded and nurtured an Adult Education program and made many strong friendships.

Barbara will be remembered not only for the impact she had on countless youth, but also as a mentor and friend. She was known for her kindness and generosity, and her beautiful, bright smile. Even after a stroke four years ago caused her to transition away from independent living, her compassion, curiosity, and kindness towards others continued unabated. Her warm smile always remained the same.

Barbara is survived by many longtime friends, who were like family, as well as her sister-in-law, Virginia Barrows, and several nieces, nephews, great-nieces, and great-nephews, all who loved their Aunt Barb dearly. She was preceded in death by her parents, her husband Vern, brothers John C. Ebright and William D. Ebright, sister Dorothy Meyer, nephews David Oak Ebright, Donald Barrows, and Larry Barrows, and brother-in-law Ernest Barrows.

Our family would like to express our sincere thanks to the nurses, doctors and caregivers at the Healthcare Center at The Forum for the loving care they gave Barbara these last four years. We'd also like to thank her many kind friends, who visited her regularly and

sent her cards and letters with warm, caring thoughts.

Because of the pandemic restrictions in place, a Celebration of Life will be planned for a later date when friends and family are able to safely travel and gather together. Skylawn Funeral Home is in charge of her arrangements. Memories of Barbara may be shared at their website, Skylawn.com. In lieu of flowers, memorial gifts may be made to The Barbara and Vernon Varenhorst Fund, Search Institute, 3001 Broadway Street NE, Suite 310, Minneapolis MN 55413 or at www.search-institute.org/donate; The Vernon and Barbara Varenhorst Endowed Scholarship at St. Olaf College, either by check to St. Olaf College, 1520 St. Olaf Avenue, Northfield, MN 55057 or at <https://wp.stolaf.edu/giving>; or a charity of choice.

Comments



“ Dear Barbara was beloved by adults and students alike. I was one of the fortunate colleagues who came to know Barbara through the Peer Counseling Program in the Palo Alto Schools. From the start it was evident that Barbara understood adolescents and championed them. Her program of peer counseling was brilliant; peers talk best to peers. Barbara and I remained fast friends for many years as we shared a concern for the moral education of our teenagers. And we prayed for one another over many years for which I am eternally grateful. The void left behind is big but Barbara's legacy is huge! My sincere sympathy to the family. I have lost a dear friend. Charlot Singleton

charlot singleton - March 14 at 05:36 PM



“ Barbara will never know the tremendous impact she had in shaping my ministry philosophy. Many thanks to her and God for bringing her into my life many years ago!
With gratitude,
Joani Schultz, Group Publishing

Joani Schultz - March 11 at 12:10 PM



“ Every Christmas season Barbara and Vernon hosted a White Elephant dinner party in their warm and gracious home. Barbara hosted a taffy pulling party when our children were young. She was a woman of kindness, charm, and grace. A follower of Jesus.
With fond memories, Mary Goerz

Mary Goerz - March 09 at 06:37 PM