

For Council of Neighborhood Libraries, San Francisco Public Library

In Memoriam:

Elaine Douglas Cahn July 26, 1922 - January 9, 2025.

Elaine Beryl Douglas Cahn died peacefully at home on January 9, 2025. She was surrounded by family. She was 102, with plans to do more.

Elaine loved to read and loved books.

Elaine often recounted an early memory in her hometown of Delta, Utah, at a very young age, sitting on a curb outside the local library reading a book. Her family moved to New York City when she was nine, where she pursued her life-long career as a research editor. She was the research editor for “Silver Platter” by Ellin Berlin (1957), wife of composer and songwriter Irving Berlin. She moved to San Francisco from New York City in 1956 upon marrying. She obtained two master’s degrees: English and Anthropology. For over 20 years (*circa* 1970’s-1990’s), combining interests, Elaine published a newsletter, FOODTALK (Library of Congress) in which she researched and wrote about the Cultural Anthropology of Food. “The Newsletter For People Who Enjoy Food For The Mind as Well As The Table.” Julia Child, Simone Beck, Narsai David and Nabisco were among subscribers. In later years she worked as a Volunteer Program Officer for the State Department’s International Diplomacy Council (IDC), combining research, and editing with her love of cultures and international travel. She developed programs for international visitors- guests of the United States Government to meet and learn about American expertise, to advance industries in their home countries. She spoke exuberantly of her job. Her career as a research editor and editor, in its many forms, spanned her life.

Elegant, erudite, eloquent, educated, exquisite. The consummate editor, Elaine was a woman of brevity, using few words to convey much. Modest about her accomplishments, and private, she did not like much ‘fuss.’ But she loved words, in all their forms: played a mean game of scrabble; played often, with family and friends. When not reading a book, she could be found doing crossword puzzles.

Always elegantly dressed, her keen eye for design shined. So did her love of language – and languages – which was furthered by international travel. She loved Folk Art, especially within her travels. On every trip, she visited markets – speaking of their vibrant cultural exchanges of information, goods and gathering. Her love of farmer’s markets, food and cultures flourished at home, too, as a multi-decade regular at the Heart of the City Farmer’s market, next to the Main library. She delighted in hearing different languages spoken, and seeing custom dress. Farmers knew her well. Often, pre-pandemic, she would pop in to the Mystery section for a book after the market. During the pandemic and after, she spoke often of the two places she missed the most: the Library and the Farmer’s Market. Excitedly, still walking strong at age 101 she returned to both.

Elaine's love of Ballet spanned from the 1930's through 2024. Immersed in arts and culture, from New York and London theatre, to eighty plus years of Ballet going -which she loved *as much* as books- to museums, opera, classical music, Elaine loved cities, where arts and culture, public libraries and learning, and farmer's markets thrive, she along with them.

An enthusiastic and curious learner, Elaine took classes at the Fromm Institute for life long learning up until her death. It was a mainstay. As a member of three book groups, one, "The Ladies Book Group" comprised of authors and writer friends, met monthly for nearly fifty years.

Books and reading remained central throughout her long life. She often said that The Richmond District library was her "favorite destination". She often talked about how "libraries were the greatest Public Institution ever invented." She never missed an opportunity to emphatically proclaim that the San Francisco Public Library was the best and best-funded Library system in the United States. She served on the Neighborhood Committee for the Library's Addition project. She served on the BLIP Committee. Across three decades, she served as the Richmond District Library representative for the San Francisco Public Library's Council of Neighborhood Libraries (CNL). She loved it. Elaine's commitment and dedication through decades of service to the San Francisco Public Library System was borne of her zest for reading, words, books, and learning which continued throughout her long life.

Honed over a century, and a tour-de-force, Elaine's pithy wisdom and clever humor shone magnificently in her later years, punctuated by priceless quips, quick word plays and dry wit. Sharp as a tack and a wealth of knowledge up until her death, hers was a life well-lived, extraordinary in depth and breadth.

She will be deeply missed.

Submitted by:

Tara M. Cahn