



Marlene Faye Donovan

April 20, 1933 - November 4, 2025

Marlene Faye Donovan (née Mumaw)
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Marlene Faye Donovan, retired gerontologist and lifelong advocate for kindness, passed peacefully on November 4, 2025, surrounded by her children.

Born on April 20, 1933, in the coal-mining town of Palmer, Pennsylvania, Marlene was named after Marlene Dietrich (a sign, perhaps, that she was destined to be a woman of both grit and glamour).

The daughter of a coal miner, she was proud to call herself a coal miner's daughter for the rest of her life. She grew up during lean years, but in a home rich with compassion and humor. Her mother often said it didn't cost anything to be kind, and their home was known in the mining town as a place where anyone down on their luck could count on a meal.

After losing her mother at age thirteen, Marlene was raised by her father. As a child, she learned about the importance of labor leader John L. Lewis and carried his principles of fairness and dignity for working people throughout her life.

She won an award for penmanship in elementary school and played trumpet in the band, which led to a lifelong love of music that she never lost. She met her husband, Lawrence Donovan, in Pennsylvania, and on one of their first dates, the convertible roof of his brother's car broke (a story that delighted her for decades). They married on October 4, 1952, in Uniontown, Pennsylvania.

Together, they built a life rooted in perseverance and partnership. Marlene put Lawrence through college and medical school, supporting his dream of becoming a doctor. While he served in the Air Force and later studied at the University of North Carolina, Marlene worked for the School of Public Health. The dean there encouraged her to continue her own education, which provided a nudge that would define the next chapter of her life.

Marlene went on to become the first in her family to earn a college degree. She held positions as varied as FBI staffer under J. Edgar Hoover, beauty salon owner, and inspector of salons for the state cosmetology board. She also took flying lessons ("but I had no sense of direction," she would later admit with a laugh).

In the 1970s, she fulfilled her dream of going to cosmetology school and later owned The Looking Glass salon for many years. Her volunteer work doing residents' hair in nursing homes led her to an unexpected new calling: she went back to school to study gerontology. She earned her bachelor's degree, then her master's degree from Des Moines University in 1999, and a fellowship in aging from the University of Iowa.

As a professor at Iowa Lakes Community College, Marlene taught for 25 years and became beloved by her students, many of whom stayed in touch long after graduation. She developed the first Third Age College at ILCC and served on Iowa's state licensure board by appointment of Governor Robert Ray. She also worked as a consultant for Wel-Life (the first assisted living

facility in Spirit Lake) and received hospice training at a leading Florida hospital.

Marlene's interests were as wide-ranging as her talents. She loved bicycles, books, dogs, church, college football, Nutty Bars, the color green, music, and a cold beer with her pizza. She appreciated good shoes and better purses. Christmas was her favorite season, and she delighted in giving more than receiving.

She was also a wonderful cook, known for her signature spaghetti sauce, perfected over decades and made almost every Sunday, and always for holidays or special occasions. It was served with her oil-and-vinegar salad and homemade garlic bread. She often said the secret to her sauce was simple: stir it with a wooden spoon and cook it with love.

She loved being a grandmother most of all, showering her grandchildren and great-grandchildren with love, attention, and the kind of encouragement that only someone who'd built her life from scratch could offer.

Marlene often marveled at her own improbable story: "A poor girl from Palmer, Pennsylvania, who went on to do all these things." Her mantra in later years was simple: "Life is short -- don't waste it."

Marlene's family extends deep gratitude to the staff at Wel-Life and Spencer Community Hospital for their care, Dr. Luke DeJong, Dr. Kevin Marquez, and to Dr. Brett Olson of Lakes Regional Healthcare, whose extraordinary compassion and friendship she treasured.

She was preceded in death by her parents, John and Elizabeth Mumaw; her ten siblings -- George, John, Foster, Eugene, Elsie, Ada, Pauline, Florence, Frances, and Sarah -- her daughter-in-law, Dorcas Donovan, and her

husband, Dr. Lawrence Timothy Donovan.

She is survived by her children, Susan Elsenbast (Mike Elsenbast), Daniel Donovan (Lori Donovan), and L.T. Donovan (Anne Donovan); six grandchildren -- Adrienne Fahforth (Doug Fahrfoth), Elizabeth Donovan, Christian Donovan (Jenny Sharma), Jonathan Donovan, Patrick Elsenbast, and Thomas Elsenbast; and four great-grandchildren -- Carson, Charlotte, Juniper, and Marigold.

No formal service is scheduled at this time. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Shriners or the Humane Society of Northwest Iowa in Milford.

No formal service is scheduled at this time. A private burial will be held in the Spirit Lake Memorial Gardens Cemetery. Arrangements are under the direction of the Robinson Funeral Home in Spirit Lake, IA. Online condolences may be left at www.spiritlakefuneralhome.com

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Shriners or the Humane Society of Northwest Iowa in Milford.

Cemetery Details

Lakeland Memory Gardens

Spirit Lake, IA 51360

Tribute Wall

RH

“ Renee Hoffman lit a candle in memory of
Marlene Faye Donovan



Renee Hoffman - November 16, 2025 at 01:04 PM

RH

I worked with Marlene at Iowa Lakes. She was so nice. We spent many Saturday mornings working at the college together.

Renee Hoffman - November 16, 2025 at 01:04 PM

JB

“ Our deepest condolences & prayers to all of her family, & friends !
Please know that Gods with you to comfort you all during these
difficult times- Bruce & Jan Bakalyar

Jan Bakalyar - November 11, 2025 at 05:18 PM

MR

“ I have known and loved Marlene for nearly 20 years starting at Iowa
Lakes! What a very dear woman! She was always so kind and
thoughtful of others and she was very proud of her family! I have no
doubt her soul has gone to meet the Lord - she will be missed but
she is where she hoped to be! Blessings to family❤️

Mary Ruyter - November 07, 2025 at 05:08 PM

BF

“ *Marlene was a bright light in my day when we got to visit. I will miss her spark and compassion. May she rest in peace.*



Billi Feller - November 07, 2025 at 02:37 PM

EM

“ *Sorry to hear this. She was a classy lady. Our sympathy to the family. Earl*

and Sue Maahs

Earl and Sue Maahs - November 07, 2025 at 10:16 AM

MK

“ *I have many great memories with Marlene over the last 15 years with our weekly visits. I will forever cherish those times !! She was so kind to me! I will miss her very much ! 🙏🙏 prayers to the Donovan family !!*

Michelle Kuhlman - November 06, 2025 at 07:17 PM

CL

I am so sorry to hear about Marlene. She was always so sweet and loved visiting with her. She will be missed. Our Sympathy. Pau and Connie Love

Connie Love - November 07, 2025 at 05:37 PM

NG

I have so many fond memories of times spent with Marlene while we both lived in the country. She was always so gracious and will be deeply missed. My sympathy and prayers to her family.

Paulette Graff

Nedra P Graff - November 13, 2025 at 02:01 PM

PD

I feel so fortunate to have known such a wonderful person as Marlene. Her life was filled with so many adventures and I loved hearing her tell about them. My thoughts and prayers to the Donovan family.

Patsy Donovan - November 26, 2025 at 09:35 AM