

IRENE CLAIRE O'BRIEN was born in New York City on November 16, 1946 to George F. and Ethel J. (Smith) O'Brien. Irene was a serious, sensitive, dramatic, creative and gifted child who was seemingly destined to have a career in the arts. She had a great talent to entertain her family with funny and creative monologues. She passed away peacefully in Denver, Colorado on March 26, 2023.

She grew up in Great Neck, and later Yorktown Heights, New York, where she attended Catholic grammar schools. She graduated high school with honors from St. Mary's High School in Katonah, New York in 1964. She received her B.A. in English and Communications with Honors from Good Counsel College/Pace University in White Plains, New York in 1968. At graduation she was awarded a prestigious Woodrow Wilson National Scholarship for Theater Arts. This was the first time that the Woodrow Wilson Fellows gave an award for continuing study in Theater Arts. Throughout her education she was involved in sports, cheerleading and local theater playing roles in many university productions in the New York area. She received awards for Debating and Public Speaking at regional contests. Irene pursued her advanced studies at Columbia University, New York City and received a Masters of Fine Arts in Directing for Theater in 1972. After graduation she did Special Studies at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, England.

Irene impacted countless lives and had numerous accomplishments while living in New York City for 25 years.

Irene was the Directing Assistant for New York Shakespeare Festival in New York City and Assistant Stage Manager for a production of Ulysses at Symphony Space in New York.

Irene along with fellow Columbia University Theater graduates began doing Off-Off Broadway productions where she was both writer and performer.

She did several productions with the Irish American Historical Society in New York and acted in The Importance of Being Ernest by Oscar Wilde.

Irene was in many community productions for the New York City Board of Education, Daytop Village and the Clark Center for Performing Arts.

In the midst of her teaching career Irene continued to perform in Off Broadway shows such as Grandma Sylvia's Funeral and Tina 'n Tony's Wedding. Both productions were interactive comedies and took the performance out into the street for an immersive experience.

Her love of dance brought her to become involved in choreography where she created dances for the Young Choreographers project. She studied ballet, modern, jazz and ballroom.

Performing for the Phoenix Repertory Company in NY, led her to become its Community Outreach Director, a position she held for seven years.

At the Phoenix, Irene originated many new programs, wrote grants to fund outreach programs that provided new creative opportunities for both teachers and students in the Tristate area.

They learned new skills for communicating through acting and dance.

She brought Movement, Creative Dance, Improvisation, Acting, Theater Production and Curriculum Design classes into regional school systems.

She shared the creative process with children and their parents while teaching in the Dalton School, Brooklyn Friends, Columbia University School for the Gifted, and the Rhinelander Center.

Irene brought programs to the Theater for the Forgotten, a New York City-based organization working in prisons, with juvenile offenders and with others of society's outcasts and the Cell Block Theater where acting training was used as rehabilitation therapy.

In 1994, Irene left New York for Philadelphia, then on to Dallas in 1997 to live closer to her brother George and his family. In Dallas, she continued working with children in the theater. Irene's passion for dancing also continued as she added Latin dancing to her skill set.

A final move to Denver happened in 2000 to be closer to her sister Anne and family. Her teaching career continued when she began substitute teaching in both the Aurora and Denver schools.

In 2007, Irene began teaching at the Community College of Aurora as an adjunct professor and remained there for sixteen years. During this time, she taught both ESL and Citizenship classes. The citizenship program allowed Irene the opportunity to use all her life experiences. She understood how critical the process of grant funding was to create a needed service that society tended to ignore. For ten years, she loved the challenge of teaching people from dozens of nations, and knew the importance of guiding them through the labyrinth of becoming a United States citizen. Her students became a part of her everyday life and she dedicated her time and energy to their success. Her time at CCA was both a give and take situation. Irene gave her life experiences and brought her skills to relate to all people, to be open, to be accepting of people's differences, and to respect their struggle to become citizens. But she also received the friendship, shared common goals, and appreciated their commitment to education of all her colleagues at CCA. This was important to Irene. The CCA community offered her a support system as well as an extended family.

In Denver, Irene's love of performing stayed with her and she began to act in student productions at the Colorado Film School. Transitioning from live acting to film was a new and exciting challenge for her. She appreciated the opportunities she had to act in these films and admired the creativity of the students. They were gracious and kind to Irene and also allowed her to share her ideas. She took their productions seriously and was even willing to do physical stunts. Irene gave her all to help make their films a success. She was always looking for ways to express herself and did several television commercials.

Irene was a communicator, lover of the theater, dance, acting and teaching. But she was also a very spiritual person with an unwavering commitment to her spiritual teacher. Her spiritual discipline was her strength for navigating through difficult times. Irene had a long and full life of giving her talents to the community through the arts and education. She impacted countless lives with her dedication and commitment to teach no matter the subject.

Her sudden departure was unexpected. She will be missed by family and friends. She is survived by her brother, George O'Brien, and her sister, Anne O'Brien LaFoley, Nephews George O'Brien and Taylor Webb, Nieces Jennifer O'Brien Thrailkill, Christine O'Brien Horstman, Erin Webb Dippold, and many grand nephews and nieces - Patrick, Jack, Josie, Dylan, Bridget, Emma and Lila.