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Thursday, May 29, 2008

Mary Helen Cavanagh, Novi

Detroit mayor's 'gracious' former wife

Oralandar Brand-Williams / The Detroit News

NOVI -- Mary Helen Cavanagh, a former first lady for the city of Detroit, died Tuesday, May 27, 2008, from lymphatic lymphoma in her Novi home.

Mrs. Cavanaugh was the former wife of Jerome Cavanagh, who served as mayor of Detroit from 1961-69, during one of the city's most turbulent times. She was 78.

Born in Kokomo, Ind., Mary Helen Martin moved to Detroit as a young girl. In 1951, the University of Detroit student met Jerome P. Cavanagh at the Michigan State Fair, where she was working as a secretary to the fair's general manager.

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The Cavanaghs wed in 1952 and had eight children.

As Detroit's first lady, Mrs. Cavanagh hosted many events for her husband, including dinner for President John F. Kennedy, John Wayne and Frank Sinatra.

At her husband's inaugural ball in 1962, according to The Detroit News, she "kept greeting people with a bright smile and firm handshake" despite battling a throat infection and a 103-degree temperature.

"She looked like a girl at first prom in a pink organza dress," the article stated. "Many a woman gasped, 'She's the mother of six children?'"

In 1966, when debating whether to move into the mansion that industrialist Alex Manoogian had given

the city, Mrs. Cavanagh said it would be "an intimate setting for my husband to entertain in and for other city



Mrs. Cavanagh

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functions. ... But it's an impractical home to raise children in. Look at the backyard -- two boatwells, a swimming pool and then the river. I can just see one of them falling in.

"...They call my husband--what is it now -- yes, a strong mayor. Well, I'm kind of a strong mother."

Mrs. Cavanagh's children said their mother was not only a "gracious and unassuming woman," but the beacon of the family.

"Mother was the calm in the middle of the frequent storms that one would expect with such a large family, and she devoted herself and her life to Jesus Christ, reaching out to many, many people through her volunteer work," wrote Michigan Court of Appeals Judge Mark Cavanagh.

The Cavanaghs divorced in 1968. Mrs. Cavanagh never remarried. The former mayor died Nov. 27, 1979.

Other survivors include her children: Patrick; David and Christopher, both former Wayne County commissioners; Mary Therese; Philip, a Wayne County commissioner; Jerome, a Wayne County Circuit judge; Elizabeth Angela Bischoff; and 13 grandchildren.

Visitation will be 4-9 p.m. today and 3-9 p.m. Friday at the O'Brien Sullivan Funeral Home, 41555 Grand River in Novi. A viewing will be 10:30 a.m. Saturday until the 11 a.m. start of the funeral liturgy at Holy Family Church, 24505 Meadowbrook Road in Novi.

Burial will be in Holy Sepulchre in Southfield. Memorial donations may be made to the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, Michigan Chapter, 1421 E. 12 Mile Bldg. A, Madison Heights, MI 48071.

Detroit News Staff Writer Mark Hicks contributed to this report.

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