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Novi resident Mary Helen Cavanagh: Detroit first lady put family first

BY JOE ROSSITER • GANNETT NEWS SERVICE • MAY 29, 2008

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When the Manoogian Mansion was donated to the City of Detroit in 1966, Jerome Cavanagh was mayor and it was generally assumed Detroit's first family would take up residence in the east-side mansion.

However, nobody bothered checking with first lady Mary Helen Cavanagh, who said she was content raising her eight children in the family's northwest Detroit home and had no intention of moving.

The episode, according to her oldest son, Mark, is an example of the determination and spirit Mrs. Cavanagh often displayed, particularly while battling leukemia during the past two decades.

Mrs. Cavanagh died Tuesday, May 27 of complications from the disease at her Novi home. She was 78.

"She was a self-motivated person who stuck to her beliefs in the face of personal difficulties and never took a backseat to anyone," said Mark Cavanagh, a Michigan Court of Appeals judge. "Whenever we needed a shoulder to lean on or an ear to bend, she was there for us."

Mrs. Cavanagh was born Mary Martin in Kokomo, Ind. She graduated from St. Benedict High School in Highland Park in 1948 and attended the University of Detroit, where she was crowned homecoming queen in 1951. A year later, she married Jerome Cavanagh, who was attending law school at U-D, and the couple began raising a family.

Cavanagh served as mayor from 1962-70. The couple separated in 1967, and the mayor and four of his sons eventually moved into the Manoogian. He died of a heart attack in 1979.

Other survivors include sons Patrick, David, Christopher, Philip and Jerome; daughters Mary Therese Cavanagh and Elizabeth Angela Bischoff, and 13 grandchildren.

Visitation is 4-9 p.m. today and 3-9 p.m. Friday at O'Brien/Sullivan Funeral Home, 41555 Grand River Ave. in Novi. A scripture service is set for 7 p.m. Friday. A funeral mass will be 11 a.m. Saturday at Holy Family Church, 24505 Meadowbrook Road in Novi. Visitation will precede the mass at 10:30 a.m.

The body will be cremated.

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