

Celebration of Life for Cathy Aileen Ritter

Elk Glen, Golden Gate Park – June 21, the First Day of Summer

Thank you all for being here today.

This gathering, on the first day of summer (or as we call it in San Francisco, the first day of winter) , in this place—Elk Glen—is exactly what Cathy would have wanted. She loved the calm of this spot. She loved the light that moves through the trees. And most of all, she loved the redwoods.

She always said she felt something sacred among them—something steady, timeless, and true. And it feels right, more than right, that we’re surrounded by them today as we celebrate her.

Cathy’s Story

Cathy was born in Sacramento to Sacramento State students, Duane and Peggy. Duane soon moved to San Francisco to join the San Francisco Police Department, rising in rank to Inspector and becoming involved in the Zodiac case—and, as it happens, playing on the same softball team as Dan White. Like many San Francisco Police and Fire families, they eventually moved to Novato, where Cathy enjoyed her formative years in the suburbs.

Later, Duane accepted a job offer to help start up the South Lake Tahoe Police Department, and the family made their way up the mountain to Tahoe Keys on the lake’s south shore. Cathy thrived in the great outdoors

—fishing from her dock, water skiing in the summer, and embracing the mountain winters. Duane, an avid runner, passed on his love for running to Cathy, a skill that later came in handy when she worked parking cars at Harvey’s casino. She loved getting her hands dirty, whether in the woodshop or in the garden.

On the softball field, Cathy was a true five-tool player: a great arm, a good glove, and speed on the basepaths—skills that would later serve her well as the mother of two active boys. She also stabled a horse and found joy riding through the forests around the lake.

After high school, Cathy came off the mountain to attend Santa Rosa Junior College, though she always admitted she “partied too much.” She honed her secretarial skills and returned to Tahoe to work at the Women’s Center, sometimes managing crisis calls on her own. A highlight of her young life was being selected to carry the Olympic Torch, an honor she took great pride in as she ran her leg of the route.

At 23, Cathy moved to San Francisco and began working as a secretary, typing up investigation reports for KD Moore Company, the Bay Area’s preeminent marine surveying firm. It was in the Hobart Building mailroom—remember mail?—that I first saw Cathy. Herb the mailman, in his pith helmet, turned out to be our matchmaker. I wooed her by having John the doorman deliver flowers to her office. She finally agreed to a date, and on May 20th, 1986, we went to see the Phillies play the Giants. She kept that ticket all these years. Two weeks later, we went to our first concert together—Tangerine Dream at the Warfield. I promptly fell asleep halfway

through the show, blaming narcolepsy (and definitely not the two margaritas). I used that excuse for as long as I could.

From then on, I was in heavenly bliss. Cathy was so vibrant and a steady force in my life. We moved in together on Polk Street, finally made it to Potrero Hill in 1988, and survived the Quake of '89 together. We got engaged in 1990 and bought our house in December of 1991. When we got engaged, Cathy—being the great sentimentalist—wanted to get married on the anniversary of our first date. Well, I couldn't get married during the week, since I had to work, so the next time May 20th fell on a Saturday was five years hence, in 1995.

A few years went by, and I said if we were going to be of any age to have kids, we'd better start now—so in September of 1993, Will was born. Then in March of 1995, Jake was born, and both of the kids were at our wedding on the SS California. For our honeymoon, we took the boys home to bed.

I won't go through our calendar month by month or even year by year, but everyone present today was part of the fabric of our life, allowing us to grow individually and as a family together. From Children's Day School, sleepovers (and of course the proverbial play dates), micro soccer, Pokémon battles, Pikachu curses, the constant wrestling matches of two boys 18 months apart—always encouraged by me—to Buena Vista Elementary School, field trips to Mexico, Big Green Soccer, SaberCat hockey, Cathy was the chief schlepper and encourager. We had to buy a Suburban just to fit everyone and all their activities.

Then came James Lick Middle School, and dealing with boys in the middle school years was always a challenge. But Cathy was up for counseling them through that, along with her fellow Moms of Boys “Support/Drinking” Group. We finally made it to high school and the challenges of converting boys to young men. Cathy was always up for the challenge.

A Life Together

I was her partner for 39 years. That’s a lifetime of shared glances, inside jokes, arguments that ended in laughter, late-night talks, and quiet Sunday mornings. A lifetime of ordinary days that now feel extraordinary because they were with her.

Although Cathy was not Jewish, she fully embraced my family’s religion and traditions. Both of our boys were Bar Mitzvahed, and Cathy took great joy in hosting the best “Latkepalooza” parties—her way of bringing people together with warmth, laughter, and plenty of good food. She loved celebrating the holidays, making everyone feel welcome, and weaving new traditions into the fabric of our family.

Then we were thrown a curveball when Cathy was diagnosed with breast cancer, and new emotional and physical challenges were in play. For the last fifteen years, she lived with cancer. But she didn’t let it take over. She didn’t let it define her. She smiled through it, joked through it, kept on living—not pretending everything was fine, but choosing—intentionally—to live with joy and gratitude anyway. Cathy battled that with the same vigor she did everything else in life. And she beat it back—but if you know cancer, it’s like a sleeper cell, and it reared its head again about six years later.

Rather than be defeated, Cathy challenged it just as she did everything—with courage, determination, and a fierce will to live.

Her strength wasn't loud. It was quiet, grounded—like these trees around us. Deep-rooted, steady, always reaching toward light, even when things were dark.

She tried every diet and naturopathic approach, read everything there was about fucking cancer, and was as knowledgeable as any MD in the business. She worked with the Cancer Journey Institute to become a coach and was relied on to have a steady hand in any situation. Her empathy and understanding were qualities that she was able to pass on to Will and Jake, and I think a little rubbed off on me as well.

Family

Before I share more of our story, I want to honor Cathy's family—those who shaped her, loved her, and stood by her throughout her life.

Cathy was the beloved daughter of Duane and Peggy, and later was also taken under the wing by Bob. She was the cherished granddaughter of Grandma Iva and Grandma GG. She was a loving sister to Nancy, and a devoted aunt to Kelley, Austin, Sam, and Rachel. She was a great-aunt to Lydia, sister-in-law to Pete and Diana, and daughter-in-law to Roberta and great uncle Elliott. She treasured her family deeply—each relationship a thread in the fabric of her life. Whether it was sharing stories, celebrating milestones, or simply being together, Cathy found joy and strength in the bonds of family.

Her Spirit

She believed in people in this beautifully open-hearted way. I used to call it “gullible”—and I teased her for it constantly. But it wasn’t foolishness. It was faith. She wanted to believe the best in everyone, and she usually did. She gave you her trust, her attention, her love, without holding anything back.

And today, look around. This group, all of you—from all corners of her life—are here because she touched you. She believed in you. She listened to you. She made you feel seen. That’s just who she was.

This isn’t a goodbye. It’s a tribute. A moment to pause and remember a life that brought light, laughter, and so much love to everyone she touched. Cathy had many gifts, but perhaps her greatest was her unwavering belief in people. She was, in the best and most loving sense of the word, the most trusting person you’d ever meet. Not because she was naïve—far from it—but because she gave you her full, undying faith the moment she met you. She believed in you. She believed what you told her, not out of blindness, but out of love. Out of a heart that chose trust over doubt, hope over cynicism.

And it made you want to be worthy of that trust. It made you want to rise to her belief in you.

She had a lightness about her—a laugh that could fill a room, a kindness that could ease the hardest day, and a fierce love that made you feel like you mattered more than anything else in the world.

Each of us carries a different piece of her story—moments, memories, little quirks and smiles. Together, those stories form a portrait of a woman who truly saw people, and loved them as they were.

Let me tell you about one of my favorite moments with her:

One evening, I told Cathy I had made reservations at Cala, a new, popular seafood-driven Mexican restaurant around the corner from SF Jazz. We had a great dinner, and just before we were getting ready to leave, I told her I had to serve some divorce papers to someone at SF Jazz. She was alarmed—not because I was serving papers (that was my job, after all, and how we'd had most of our dates before the kids), but because I asked her to go inside with me to be a witness. She really didn't want to do it, but I told her this service was contentious and that I really needed her support. I'd gotten front-row tickets, and explained that the person I was serving was the drummer in the band—when they came on stage, I'd walk up and serve him. By now, Cathy was in tears, but she reluctantly trudged along. At no point did she know who was playing—there was no advertising on the marquee. We got to our seats, the lights came down, and out came Van Morrison, right in front of us, and he started playing the sax. Needless to say, she started crying, laughing, and then punching my leg. There were many events like this, and I am going to miss them so much.

Cathy and I are honored that our neighbor Keith Goldstein will play a couple of tunes from Van Morrison right after this

Her Symbols and Her Heart

She loved her Claddagh ring. The symbols, Heart, hands, crown. Love, loyalty, friendship. Not just symbols—truths she lived by. She loved hard. She stood by her people. And she made everyone she loved feel like they truly belonged.

She had Irish blood in her—no doubt about it. You could hear it in her stories, feel it in her humor, and see it in her strength.

But her heart—her whole, wide, beautiful heart—belonged to her boys: Will and Jake.

Will. Jake. You were her world. Her joy. Her everything. From the moment she held you, she poured every drop of herself into loving you, guiding you, and believing in you. She was your protector, your greatest fan, your soft place to land—and I know she still is. She lives in you. Her strength, her warmth, her love—it's all still here, and it always will be.

And her voice... I can still hear it. Sometimes I think I always will. Whether she was singing, telling a story, calling us to dinner, or just whispering something softly—it was a voice that made everything feel okay. It was home.

The Quiet Ways She Changed Us

She touched lives. Not with grand gestures, but in quiet, consistent ways. She made people feel seen. Heard. Cared for. She brought people together.

And today, here we are—surrounded by redwoods, wrapped in light, on the first day of summer.

The beginning of the season she loved most. A season full of warmth, long days, and golden hours. A season for growing, for remembering, and for carrying forward the people we've loved and lost.

So let us carry her with us. In the way we love. In the way we show up. In the way we choose joy, even when it's hard.

A Closing Reflection

And I'll close with this, from "The Universe" messages by Mike Dooley, which Cathy kept in front of her every day:

Life is not what you see, but what you've projected.

It's not what you've felt, but what you've decided.

It's not what you've experienced, but how you've remembered it.

It's not what you've forged, but what you've allowed.

And it's not who's appeared, but who you've summoned.

And this should serve you well, beloved, until you find what you already have.

Let's now take a moment—about thirty seconds—of silence, to remember Cathy in your own way. Close your eyes, if you like. Think of her laugh. Her voice. The moment she made you feel seen.

Let her be with you now.

Pause for 30 seconds of silence

Thank you. Thank you for loving her, for being here, for carrying her light forward.

If anyone would like to share a story or a memory of Cathy, I invite you to do so now or after the ceremony. She loved hearing people's stories, and I know she'd love to hear yours today.