



## Betsy J. Gertz

September 19, 2020

Betsy J. Gertz, 61, died in Sarasota on Saturday, September 19, 2020 after a rich and accomplished life as an artist, medic and teacher. She will be remembered by her family and friends for her remarkable enthusiasm, love of life, generosity, contagious laughter, and her magical ways of connecting with people and animals. After many years of suffering from chronic pain following a traumatic brain injury, Betsy chose to end her life.

Born December 7, 1958 in Providence, Rhode Island, Betsy was the daughter of Junius “Babe” Gertz and Sandra “Yuffee” Gertz. The baby of the family, she followed three older siblings; Barry, Shelley and Nancy.

By age 12, Betsy showed promise as an artist and demonstrated her unabashed love for animals, mostly by saving the ones she found in the field next door. When she wasn’t nursing wounded birds and abandoned rabbits, she was working in her darkroom, sculpting, making terrariums or candles.

After graduating from Cranston High School West in 1977 with a Most Humorous trophy in hand, Betsy continued her education as a nurse, paramedic, and teacher. While she had many things to be proud of, she always loved to brag about being the first female firefighter in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

A true renaissance woman, Betsy often proclaimed, “I can do anything I want to do,” and she did, with purpose and excellence. Betsy pushed the boundaries of how much can happen in one lifetime. She was a paramedic, nurse, photographer, potter, sculptor, chef, teacher, comic, musician, animal lover and people magnet. Life was an exquisite buffet for Betsy, and she relished the whole spread. The only thing that could make it sweeter was when she could share it with others.

A world traveler, Betsy never went anywhere without her camera. More than anything, she loved creating spontaneous portraits of the people she met. In her own home, the door was always open, food was abundant, music was playing, and memories were being

made, with friends, family, artists, musicians, and often, people she had only met that day.

In Massachusetts, Betsy trained EMT's, medical students, firefighters, physicians, and other health care workers in CPR and Advanced Life Support. She worked for several ambulance companies and local colleges, and created her own training company, Lifesaving Maneuvers. Betsy's favorite stories, told with her inimitable comedic flair, were about saving lives.

Tragically, Betsy's career as a medic was cut short in 2003 when she became ill with herpes encephalitis, a life-threatening infection. She went through years of acute treatment and rehabilitation, needing to relearn everything: how to walk, count, and write. Like most brain-injury survivors, Betsy struggled with mood swings, body pain, cognitive losses, and intermittent suicidal depression. A profound loss for Betsy was her inability to continue saving other peoples' lives. She was challenged to save her own.

Betsy found her way back from catastrophic losses, largely by re-embracing her art. In 2007, she mounted her first show, "Lifesaving Maneuvers" at ArtSpace, in Maynard, Massachusetts. Lifesaving Maneuvers was a multimedia installation she created with artist and friend Tali Silver, who inspired Betsy to return to photography. With Silver by her side, Betsy found new ways of seeing with the camera and discovered a passion for photographing hands, often with her own hand in the image, reaching to her subject. In an article in the Boston Globe, "Photographer Refocuses on Life," Betsy explained her love of spontaneous portraits. It's "so people can see themselves, so they can come in and say, 'Hey, that's me, and I'm real.'"

Always eager to encourage others, Betsy wrote on her website profile: "Maybe you, too, have lost something important, something that feels as big as your life, and just as irreplaceable. Don't despair. Rock on. There is another life out there waiting for you."

Despite excellent care and support, Betsy's challenges persisted. As a brain injury survivor, she spent years struggling to be understood as disabled and still seen as whole. In 2011, she relocated to Florida, eventually settling in Sarasota on her ranch, "Piece of Peace" with her beloved family of animals. There, in the company of many helpers, loving friends and neighbors, Betsy found her favorite place on earth.

"Piece of Peace" was Betsy's temple, her safe haven in a world that was sometimes overwhelming. She rescued animals that needed a home, spreading love and affection, healing them as they healed her. Generously, she shared her sanctuary with many friends. There, Betsy realized her lifelong dream of creating a calm, joyful and nurturing

community where animals and people, in the company of one another, could flourish.

While she kept busy as a wise and loving “mother” to horses, dogs, cats, kittens, burros, ducks, a sand crane and herds of deer, Betsy worked hard in her photographic and ceramic studios. Ironically, she credited her frequent bursts of creativity to the same brain injury that was causing her physical decline. Her works during this period include sculpture, photographs, and ceramics.

Social media was the perfect pathway for Betsy to share her work and inspire others at the same time. For several years, she posted nature images that could be interpreted differently by whoever viewed the picture: photos of tree trunks that resembled a face, stones that looked like turtles. Betsy wanted to help others free their imagination and when sharing her work, always asked, “What do you see?”

In 2017, Betsy published her collection of evocative hand images in the book titled, Encounters. In it, she celebrates the lives of people of every color, nationality, age, faith, and life story. Betsy often said, “I didn’t take the picture. It was given to me and I received it with gratitude.” And about her subjects: “Someone was paying attention to them. They weren’t invisible.”

Betsy’s recent art show in March 2020 at the Stakenborg-Greenberg Gallery in Sarasota featured her latest work, “Your Imagination is Yours.”

Betsy is survived by her brother Barry Gertz and wife, Sandy Gertz, sister Shelley Sigal and husband Andrew Sigal, and sister Nancy Gertz; by her nieces and nephews, Anya Machala, Stefan and Julian Cohen, and Jeremy and Lauren Gertz; her uncle, Lester Yuffee, and many cousins. Her beloved animals are in the good hands and hearts of friends and neighbors in the Saddle Creek area. Betsy’s family is grateful for all of her beloved community of devoted, loving friends and neighbors in Sarasota and Saddle Creek.

Burial will be private at Sinai Memorial Park, Warwick, RI. A virtual funeral service will be held Wednesday, September 30, at 5 pm. Virtual shiva hours are Thursday, October 1 at 7:30 pm, and Sunday October 3 at 4 pm. All are welcome; kindly pre-register on the event page of the Congregation Dorshei Tzedek calendar <https://www.dorsheitzedek.org/calendar>.

Memorial donations may be made to organizations that support brain injury survivors, the welfare of animals, the Sarasota art community, or Butler Hospital in Providence, RI.



# Comments

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“ To The Gertz Family,  
I am saddened to read this. I have known Betsy since the early 80ies. I was her Partner when she was in Medic school down at the Cape and Islands Fire Academy; what now seems like ages ago. Boy we had such a great time and class...how often do you hear that when talking about school.  
We both went separate ways after the class, as I was the only none Cape and South Shore person in the class and I was in Nursing school at the same time while working for a Fire Dept..  
Then in 2008 I looked her up and found out about her and her photography. I remember her in class with that camera taking pictures like we had nothing better to do with our time in the class.  
I read on her website about how she was in Manyard and doing photography. I also remember when she had a program and taught EMS.  
I asked her if she remembered me knowing how devastating an illness she had. In typical Betsy fashion...and this is directly copied and pasted from her email to me..."Of course I remember you!  
There's lot's that I don't remember, but you I do!"  
This is how I will always remember her!  
For some reason Besty's name popped into my head tonight and I knew she had moved to Florida. So I looked her up only to see this . I am heartbroken.  
She was one of a kind! I am so sorry for your loss. I will miss her.

**Chris Tarbassian** - January 31 at 08:46 PM



“ Chris, I remember Betsy talking about you. People were Betsy's favorite thing about life and she would never forget you. This is such a tragedy. Thank you so much for your note.  
Nancy

**Nancy Gertz** - January 31 at 09:34 PM

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“ I worked with Betsy at NSP1 a long time ago. She enjoyed practical jokes like interrupting me when I was trying to record a message on the company's phone recorder, at least 4 times. She thought that was hilarious when I had to start over-4 times. There were other funny pranks along the way that still make me smile. I was privileged to know her and I am sorry she has passed.

**Michelle D** - December 04, 2020 at 06:20 PM

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“ Nancy Gertz is following this tribute.

**Nancy Gertz** - October 15, 2020 at 11:35 PM

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“ Betsy was some SPECIAL person! And just like you, we are feeling guilty for not being in touch with her for so long. Alice, my partner, and I were friends with Betsy originally through the LGBTQ community. The last time we visited her ranch, Piece of Peace, was in June when we talked with our masks on. She had just installed an outdoor kitchen as she was a proud chef. Betsy often came to Temple Emanu-El services with us and on one occasion when we had Alice's grandchildren with us, we saw how much she loved kids and how perceptive and tender she was with them. Betsy was truly one of the most unusual people in our circle of friends. She was more insightful, more sensitive, and more inquisitive than anyone we knew. In our Temple's lobby is a copy of ENCOUNTERS her photographic essays on hands. It, indeed, reflects how Betsy saw the world. She was an extraordinarily creative, talented, but troubled woman. We are sorry to have lost her. Hopefully, now she has found true peace.

Susan Skovronek, October 7, 2020

**Susan Skovronek** - October 07, 2020 at 04:33 PM

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“ I met Betsy on a several occasions in our neighborhood of Saddle Creek. Always very kind and interesting. She really did draw you in with her enthusiasm and passion....so much of both! My condolences to her family on your loss. Please know there are others who share in your grief and that somehow a small part of her stays with those she touched.

**Adelaide Aurelius** - October 01, 2020 at 08:57 PM

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“ Betsy was a kind person with a big heart. While over to her house a short time ago she was showing her photographs and said “what do you see”. We shared our love for bike riding and exercise. She even told me she would come to my house on Thanksgiving to take a real nice family photo but she said I will pose everyone for the picture . My deepest sympathy to her entire family  
Denise

**Denise Stork** - September 30, 2020 at 04:36 PM

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“ Betsy and I shared our challenges of chronic pain, mental health issues, DBT, and Nursing histories. We shared our stories about animals, creativity, love of singing and how to survive our demons.  
The world has lost a beautiful person.  
Rest In Peace, my friend.

**Barbara Gerber** - September 30, 2020 at 12:06 PM

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“ I did not know her but after reading this obituary, I wish I had known her. I have a love for animals, always have. She sounded like someone I would have been blessed to have as a friend. My condolences to family and friends.

**Sheila Littleton** - September 30, 2020 at 09:57 AM

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“ To Betsy's family & friends, I send my deepest condolences. As a member of her CHSW Class of '77, I was grateful to reconnect with her last year. Her photos from our class party in East Greenwich, RI captured smiles and laughter. This will be how I remember Betsy. I will also treasure the gift of her book, "Encounters".  
May she rest in eternal Peace,  
Linda Iannotti  
Cranston, RI

**Linda Iannotti** - September 30, 2020 at 09:36 AM

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“ Patty Sandler lit a candle in memory of Betsy J. Gertz



**Patty Sandler** - September 30, 2020 at 08:34 AM