



Barbara Wiltse Bates

February 18, 1927 - May 12, 2025

Barbara Wiltse Bates (February 18, 1927 – May 12, 2025) died in Sarasota, Florida, at age 98, leaving a legacy of groundbreaking leadership, service, and unfailing encouragement to women to “stand up for yourself.”

Barbara grew up in Catskill, New York. She was predeceased by her parents Alexander Wiltse III and Helena May Duncan Wiltse and brothers; Alexander Wiltse IV, Robert Harlan Wiltse, and Roderic Duncan Wiltse.

Barbara joined the Bell System in Catskill at 16 as a wartime telephone operator and spent the next 35 years climbing the ladder through grit, warmth, and a voice that could turn an angry customer into a friend.

From switchboards in Catskill to corporate boardrooms in Manhattan, Barbara shattered barrier after barrier. She ran busy operator centers, steered strike operations, and became one of the first female executives at 9X (later NYNEX), eventually serving as Director of Corporate Contributions and Community Affairs and Vice-President of the NYNEX Foundation.

Under her tenure the Foundation became one of the region’s largest corporate funders of Head Start expansion, teacher training initiatives, and informal-science learning, including helping the New York Hall of Science modernize into a hands-on science center. Fortune magazine recognized her

as a corporate executive “putting business muscle behind public-school reform.” Barbara also championed restoration projects at Ellis Island and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and other community causes across New York and New England. Friends recall her striding into a meeting of 160 men in a bright red suit, commanding the room with conviction and kindness.

A gifted communicator, Barbara conceived Operator Recognition Week and produced the award-winning short film “Thanks a Billion,” archived in the Library of Congress, and PBS documentary “Children in Crisis.” She taught the “Meet the Press” media-skills course, coaching scores of industry leaders to answer tough questions with confidence and compassion.

After retiring to Florida in 1992, Barbara played golf, swam laps, hosted bridge nights, won local photography contests, and mentored young women aspiring to success in the business world.

Barbara is survived by her loving son David, grandchildren David Jr. and Jacqueline, daughter-in-law, Nina, and a circle of nieces, nephews, and friends.

A memorial service will be held on Friday, June 20, 2025, at 11:30am, at Church of the Redeemer, 222 S. Palm Avenue, Sarasota, FL 34236.

In lieu of flowers donations may be made to St. Jude's Children Research, 501 St. Jude Place, Memphis, TN 38105 or stjude.org.

Previous Events

Memorial Service

JUN **20**. 11:30 AM (ET)

Church of the Redeemer Episcopal
222 S Palm Ave
Sarasota, FL 34236-6799
(941) 955-4263