

## Mary Ellen Sweeney



Mary Ellen Sweeney was one of eight children, and one of a kind. In her early school years, Mary Ellen joined the basketball team that arguably became the bad girls of the local Catholic school league for their unconventional playing style: "We were one of the first teams to do jump shots," Mary Ellen says. "We were doing a very innovative thing that no one else was trying -- they were just sitting down!" Mary Ellen was hardly one for sitting down. Born in 1944 to Lillian Clark, a writing teacher, and William Sweeney, a codebreaker for RCA, Mary Ellen grew up in a mentally and physically active family in Queens, New York. When she wasn't playing basketball, running track, or playing violin or fife in musical parades, she was with her large family. She was closest with her older brother, Bill, because the two always "got things done." The true north of the family was Mary Ellen's mom, who shared her love for music and language with her children. "Everyone was interested in Mother," Mary Ellen says. "She had a big impact on us."

Unlike most women of the time, Mary Ellen decided to continue her education after high school. She studied at Molloy College in Rockville Center on Long Island for four years before graduating in the early 1960s and earning a scholarship to St. John's law school. At St. John's, Mary Ellen again stood out as one of just two women in a 30-person class and for her participation in the school's prestigious law review. Mary Ellen wasted no time pursuing a career and family after finishing law school. In 1969, she started practicing law at Proskauer Rose in New York and married a man who also came from a big Catholic family. Although the two later divorced, they had two wonderful children — Rachel in 1972 and Celeste in 1977.

Even with her busy legal career, Mary Ellen made ample time and memories for her kids. Rachel speaks fondly of the Girl Scout camping trips her mother led and the weekends they spent out in the Catskills woods. Mary Ellen also taught her children how to take care of the garden at their home in Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island, and helped them grow into strong writers like herself. Celeste was editor of the literary magazine and now is managing editor for European, Middle Eastern and African stocks at Bloomberg News in the Netherlands. Rachel edited the high school newspaper and is now finishing a book to help adult children take care of parents with Alzheimer's. Eventually, Mary Ellen made the switch from practicing law to teaching law. The driving impetus behind the change was the evolution of Mary Ellen's personal philosophy: "I wanted to work on starting mindsets, not starting lawsuits." She enjoyed teaching civil and business law primarily through the City and State of New York university systems for over 20 years and finished her career as a court-appointed attorney in the Bronx family courts.

She spent most of the last 20 years living by herself in New York City. She loved walking by the water front and staying active in grassroots political movements during her retirement years. At Brightview, she enjoys talking investments with her friends, attending live musical performances, doing crossword puzzles, and spending time with Rachel and her grandkids, who live nearby. What stands out to people who know Mary Ellen today is her sharp analytical mind, wordplay mastery and charming playfulness. Yet what Mary Ellen cherishes more than her intellect or sense of humor is the family that made her that way. "I'm very fortunate to have bloodlines of my parents who were helpful to all of their kids," she says. "I'm lucky for my sister and brothers. I miss them and I don't miss them, because they have their own things to do."