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Tessa T. Newsom -- businesswoman, knitter, mother of supervisor

Kelly St. John, Chronicle Staff Writer

May 14, 2002



2002-05-14 04:00:00 PDT San Francisco -- Tessa Thomas Newsom, a businesswoman and mother of San Francisco Supervisor Gavin Newsom, died Thursday in her home in San Francisco after a long fight with breast cancer. She was 55.



A striking and energetic woman who counted antiques, knitting and needlepoint among her passions, Mrs. Newsom worked most recently as controller of PlumpJack Management Group, a string of cafes, wine shops and other Northern California businesses owned by her son.

"My mom would knit through a movie. She wouldn't sit still," said her daughter, Hilary Newsom Callan. "She worked seven days a week, even through her illness. It was pretty tremendous."

Mrs. Newsom and her identical twin sister, Anne, were born in San Francisco on Nov. 28, 1946. Her father, Arthur L. Menzies, was the assistant curator at Strybing Arboretum in Golden Gate Park. Her mother, Barbara Menzies, acted under the stage name of Jean T. Addis in the San Francisco Actor's Workshop.

As a teenager, Mrs. Newsom was a champion singles tennis player and graduated from Lowell High School in San Francisco. She enrolled in Chico State College, but left at age 19 to wed William A. Newsom Jr., then a tax attorney for the family of J. Paul Getty.

The couple married in 1966, had son Gavin in 1967, and daughter Hilary in 1968. They filed for divorce in 1971, and Mrs. Newsom never remarried.

While raising her two children, Mrs. Newsom worked as a legal secretary. She also enrolled as a part-time student at the University of San Francisco, eventually graduating with a bachelor's degree in social studies. It was one of her proudest accomplishments.

Mrs. Newsom worked as a real estate agent in Marin County. Later, she joined her son's PlumpJack enterprise, working her way up to the position of controller.

A natural athlete with an infectious smile, Mrs. Newsom balanced a host of activities with her work and home life. She was an avid reader and traveler who encouraged her children to study French and Italian.

An antique collector, Mrs. Newsom loved to travel to Europe, often in search of an unusual find.

"My mom loved a great hunt at a flea market, in Rome, Paris and London," Callan said. "She would find the most wonderful antiques."

Mrs. Newsom was found to have breast cancer nearly four years ago. The disease later spread to her liver. Although she was in failing health, she attended the weddings of both her children last year.

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"She really did try to fight to survive," said her sister, Anne Scherer. "Tessa was very lucky to see them both married."

In addition to her daughter, son and twin sister, all of San Francisco, Mrs.

Newsom is survived by another sister, Cindy Asner, of Studio City.

A private memorial service has been held.

Memorial contributions may be made to the Dr. Ernest Rosenbaum Cancer Supportive Care Program, Stanford Center for Integrative Medicine, 1101 Welch Road, Suite A6, Palo Alto, CA 94304, or to the Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund for Gerena Menzies that can be mailed c/o the PlumpJack Management Group, 3201 Fillmore St., San Francisco, CA 92143. The fund can be phoned at (877) 339-7647 or reached online at www.charitablegift.org.

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