

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Mary Nirmaier, pioneering wartime pilot, remembered as generous, free-spirited

By [Bailey Brewer](#)

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"She always had a twinkle in her eye," said retired US Navy Capt. William Bond, Mary Burch Nirmaier's escort at her reception of the Congressional Gold Medal in March. "She always had this

COLUMBIA — Family and friends described Mary Burch Nirmaier as an inspiration.

She served as a pilot during World War II, graduating in 1944 at the age of 23 from the Women Airforce Service Pilot program. Following the war, she spent 14 months on active duty in Arizona and another 20 years in the Air Force Reserve.

Weighing less

little mischievous grin" and was "always looking to pursue knowledge." ; Courtesy photo
than 120 pounds
on a nimble
frame of 5 feet 2 inches, Mrs. Nirmaier required "five pillows to fly the plane," her daughter Rowan said.

Mrs. Nirmaier died Sunday, Aug. 29, 2010, at University Hospital. She was 89 years old.

She was honored in March of this year in Washington, D.C., where she received a Congressional Gold Medal for her efforts in the war. She was escorted at the ceremony by retired Navy Capt. William Bond, a graduate of the University of Missouri, who described Nirmaier as his "adopted mom."

"To know her's to love her," Bond said.

While most noted in the Columbia and military communities for her success as a woman in flight, Mrs. Nirmaier was even more to her family and friends.

Amy Hoffman-Orman serves as the office manager of the Nirmaier Estates, but prefers the title "personal assistant" to Mrs. Nirmaier, as the latter was the more rewarding role.

Mrs. Nirmaier always advised people not to ask about the "what ifs" in life, and was a mentor, especially for young women.

"Her philosophy was to take every opportunity you can," Hoffman-Orman said.

About 20 years before her death, Mrs. Nirmaier suffered a concussion and extensive damage to both of her elbows when a deck she was standing on collapsed. According to her son Scott Nirmaier, that particular accident was what led to the end of her flight career.

"She broke her wings," he said.

But her spiritual wings remained intact. While Mrs. Nirmaier recovered, a Chinese family stayed with and took care of her. During their stay, she purchased tap shoes from Goodwill for a young daughter in the family.

Patty Clover, a close friend of Mrs. Nirmaier's for more than 20 years, said she was "generous to a fault."

Spending the majority of her years raising four children as a single mother, Mrs. Nirmaier believed firmly in giving to those in need as a way of paying back those who had helped her with rent payments and other past needs. It seemed to Clover that the more down-and-out an individual was, the more Mrs. Nirmaier wanted to help that person.

Scott and Rowan have memories of their mother being taken advantage of financially by some individuals she

helped, but they said she never seemed to lose steam or desire to give people another chance.

When Rowan asked her mother once, “What makes you keep trying?” she answered that she figured she would only get “burned” about 10 percent of the time, and she would not let that 10 percent ruin the joy she received from the remaining 90 percent.

As a part of her service to the community, Mrs. Nirmaier provided rental housing to MU students, many of them from overseas and many of them women. She also provided apartments to homeless veterans.

Rowan remembered that her mother loved to sit on the porch of her home and wait for the students to arrive home from classes; there, she would mentor and encourage them.

Mrs. Nirmaier bonded closely with a Thai family during the early 1970s, while the father of the household worked to earn his degree from MU. The family returned back to their native country and Mrs. Nirmaier kept in touch with them over the years. In 2007 she traveled to Thailand to reunite with them.

Scott recalled a time in the late 1960s when his mother and his siblings approached a man named Helmut at a gas station. Scott was in his teens, and they were drawn to Helmut’s stylish car. As a result of the encounter, Helmut was invited to stay with the Nirmaier family. He stayed for a month.

“Mom was pretty hip,” Scott said.

Scott also said he remembers fondly when his mom let he and his brother, Clayton, hitchhike to California. She sent the boys on their way with a note that explained they were not runaways and included her phone number.

Scott said he learned from his mother not to worry about security, but instead to “live an interesting life” and “go for experience.”

Friend Mary McCleary Posner knew Mrs. Nirmaier for more than 20 years, but of all of her friend’s incredible stories, one is still her favorite.

On her last flight while serving as a war pilot, Mrs. Nirmaier “borrowed” a radio that wasn’t approved for air travel so she and her co-pilot could enjoy some big band music as they cruised through an Arizona valley.

Posner would request that Mrs. Nirmaier tell her that story even though she had heard it more than once. Each time, Posner said, “she would laugh and tell me the story again.”

“I love Mary, and I always have,” Posner said of her friend. “She became my hero.”

Mrs. Nirmaier is survived by her brother, Robert Burch; daughters Sara Stone of Eugene, Ore., and Rowan Camille Nirmaier of Reedsport, Ore.; a son, Scott Nirmaier, of Columbia; nieces Ronita Miller and Barbara Jean Burch of Valley Mills, Texas; seven grandchildren; and seven great-grandchildren.

Her former husband, Lt. Col. Clayton Nirmaier; brothers Kenneth and Craig Burch; and her son, Clayton Greg Nirmaier, died earlier.

Visitation will be from 5 to 7 p.m. on Monday, Sept. 6, at Memorial Funeral Home. A memorial service followed by a burial with full military honors will take place at 11 a.m. on Tuesday, Sept. 7, at Memorial Funeral Home and the adjoining Memorial Park Cemetery, 1217 Business Loop 70 West. All events are open to the public.

A "celebration of life" will follow the burial. Time and location will be announced at the visitation and service.

Tributes may be made online at www.memorialfuneralhomeandcemetery.com.

Mrs. Nirmaier left written instructions to be buried in her Air Force uniform. Rowan will be singing "The Lord's Prayer" and "Amazing Grace," accompanied in the latter by her niece, Lorrie Taylor. Per Mrs. Nirmaier's request, the service will conclude with "When the Saints Go Marching In," involving audience participation.

Double Honor Guard military honors will be rendered by Whiteman Air Force Base personnel at the burial. The Honor Guard will also serve as Mrs. Nirmaier's pallbearers.

"They are going to carry her," Mary Posner said, "and that's perfect."