

Family: Former Santa Rosa teacher killed by fire

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Health issues kept retired English teacher Marnie Schwartz from getting out in recent years.

But there was no shortage of friends who came to honor her during a memorial service earlier this month at Congregation Shomrei Torah in Santa Rosa.

Smart and compassionate, Schwartz, 68, had once been president of the synagogue while working in local schools teaching English as a second language.

Her desire to be part of the Reform congregation is the reason she moved to Santa Rosa in the first place many years ago, according to a longtime friend.

When the Tubbs fire swept into the city early Oct. 9, rampaging through Schwartz's Coffey Park neighborhood, neighbors who pounded on her door and tried to warn her reported she never responded, her brother-in-law, Steve Smith, said.

Remains found in the ashes of her Hopper Avenue house indicate she died there, said Smith, a resident of Groton, New York. The Sonoma County Coroner's Office is still trying to confirm the remains are hers, though family and friends said there is no real doubt.

Schwartz had substantial hearing loss and used a machine at night for sleep apnea that may have prevented her from realizing neighbors were trying to warn her, close friend and colleague Denise Stewart, of Fremont, said. Her two daughters thought of Schwartz as an aunt and called her that.

"She was brilliant, and she had a great sense of humor," Stewart said.

Born Marjorie Schwartz on Oct. 23, 1948 outside of New York City, but known always as Marnie, Schwartz was the oldest of three sisters, said her youngest sister, Deborah Schwartz of Groton.

She got a bachelor's degree in psychology at State University of New York in Binghamton, before moving to California.

Schwartz obtained at least two master's degrees, including one in teaching English-language learners, family members said. She also was briefly married but had been single since 1992, Smith said.

Schwartz lived and taught for a time in Walnut Creek and in 1997 was among a select group chosen by the California Teachers Association to train teachers to teach English-language learners in their classrooms.

That's how she and Stewart, also an ESL teacher, met. Through 2004, they often traveled together to various part of the state to lead workshops and share their expertise on teaching ESL, Stewart said.

During that time, Schwartz began teaching in San Rafael, before eventually moving to Santa Rosa and teaching at Lewis Adult School in Santa Rosa and doing some work for Geyserville Unified School District.

She, Stewart and a partner also launched a website to share free ESL resources and materials, Stewart said.

"Teachers sometimes are strapped for cash, and we wanted to make sure there was enough help out there for anybody who needed assistance," Stewart said.

Schwartz devoted her life to helping those on the margins, both through her teaching and as a political activist.

Some remembered her for calling everyone "sweetheart," and for having a "Visualize Whirled Peas" bumper sticker on her car.

As president of Shomrei Torah during part of the more than 30 years the congregation shared space with a United Methodist church, Schwartz was instrumental in raising support for construction of a hilltop synagogue above Bennett Valley Road that was dedicated a decade ago, congregation member Nina Bonos said.

Schwartz loved traveling, especially to Africa, and the congregation's Rabbi George Gittleman called her "a very bright, outgoing, thoughtful, interesting person.

"Also, she was a progressive thinker and cared about the most vulnerable in society, and saw that as part of her mission: to help people who struggle in the world," he said.

She also was someone who wrestled with her faith, raising questions and issues at Torah study.

"Marnie was a special person," said Marci Gladstone, a religious teacher at Shomrei Torah, "because she always tried to put herself in the shoes of others — of those who had less — and make their lives better. Not everybody does that."

In addition to Deborah Schwartz, Marnie Schwartz is survived by sister Elizabeth Kelchner of Denver, Colo., as well as three nephews and a niece.

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