

Carol Yannacone, who led fight against DDT that started on Long Island, dies at 90



Carol Yannacone, formerly of Yaphank and Patchogue, died Feb. 23 at age 90. Credit: Yannacone family

By Frank Lovece [Special to Newsday](#) Updated March 2, 2025 4:42 pm

Few people can say they helped save an American symbol. But Carol Yannacone, formerly of Yaphank and Patchogue, was not like most people.

As a co-founder of the Environmental Defense Fund, she helped ban the insecticide DDT, starting in Suffolk County. It was particularly deadly to bald eagles. And in 1999, President Bill Clinton announced that because of the efforts she and her attorney husband, Victor Yannacone, had sparked, the eagle population had rebounded and the federal government was removing the great bird from the endangered species list.

“DDT was not only affecting eagles but also the osprey, which is our signature bird,” an unofficial symbol of Long Island, said SUNY Old Westbury journalism professor Karl Grossman, of Sag Harbor. Grossman had covered the

Yannacones as a reporter in the 1960s and '70s. "Victor and Carol were giants in the environmental movement."

The couple later helped spearhead efforts to have the U.S. government acknowledge that diseases and birth defects plaguing soldiers and their families due to wartime use of the herbicide Agent Orange were indeed service-related. This resulted in the Agent Orange Act of 1991, providing disability compensation.

But for Carol Yannacone, who died Feb. 23 at age 90 of natural causes in a hospice near the couple's home in Lahaina, Hawaii, it was about more than simply compensating service members. "She counseled all the mothers of the children who suffered the polygenetic catastrophic birth defects," said her husband. "We made a count: She handled 15,000 calls into the early 2000s."

Many were from the veterans themselves. "We'd get a call during dinnertime and there'd be a veteran on the phone who wanted to talk to Carol," he continued. "And she'd talk to him and come back to the table in tears. And she'd say the veteran had called her to say goodbye. He was dying."

Carol Annia Meyer was born July 13, 1934, in Brooklyn, the younger of two daughters of mechanic "Happy" Meyer — his family said his given name was either Harry or Henry, and it appears both ways in census records — and homemaker Frances Annia Gower Meyer. "It was a Friday the 13th," said her husband. "And throughout her early life up until her 30s, her nickname was Jinx."

After World War II, the Meyer family began summering in West Yaphank and eventually built a home there. Carol developed a deep interest in the ecosystem of nearby Upper Yaphank Lake, where she often swam.

After graduating from Earl L. Vandermeulen High School in Port Jefferson, she attended Hofstra University for two years before family finances led her to leave and find work as a medical lab technician at Brookhaven National Laboratory. There she became reacquainted with former classmate Victor Yannacone, whom she married in 1958.

Starting a family, they moved to Patchogue in 1961. Later that decade, while visiting her mother in West Yaphank, Carol saw countless dead fish floating on the surface of her childhood lake — victims of Suffolk County's DDT spraying

for mosquitoes. Rachel Carson's landmark 1962 book "Silent Spring" had established the dangers of DDT, and Carol, quipped her husband, "demanded of me that if I ever wanted to eat dinner again, that I do something about it. ... And out of that came the lawsuit."

And so in June 1966, with Carol as plaintiff, Victor filed suit in state Supreme Court in Riverhead to prevent further spraying. While the county won that case, public pressure led it in August to voluntarily end DDT use.

It was only the start. "EDF was Carol's idea," her husband said. "She conceived the idea in Atlantic City at a [September 1967] meeting of the Audubon Society," where Victor added it to the speech he was giving. On Oct. 10, 1967, as an Environmental Defense Fund representative confirmed to Newsday, "She and Victor Yannacone were two of the 10 founders who signed the certificate of incorporation for Environmental Defense Fund," which for many years was headquartered in East Setauket and is now in Manhattan, with 14 more offices worldwide.

While the Yannacones were "kicked out" a year later, Victor recalled without rancor, the lawsuits continued. New York State banned DDT in 1970. The United States banned it in 1972.

In addition to her activism, Carol Yannacone taught Sunday school at the Yaphank Presbyterian Church.

"She was a great woman who left the world a better place than she found it," her husband said.

In addition to him, she is survived by their son, Victor John Yannacone III, of Hawaii; daughter, Claire Yannacone, of Patchogue; and three grandchildren.

There was no formal service, said her husband. "She's being cremated, and Claire is going to bury the remains at our family plot at the Yaphank [Presbyterian Church] Cemetery a quarter-mile from the lake where it all began."

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