



*Opinion by
Karl Grossman*

KARL GROSSMAN: SUFFOLK CLOSE UP

Carol Annia Meyer Yannacone

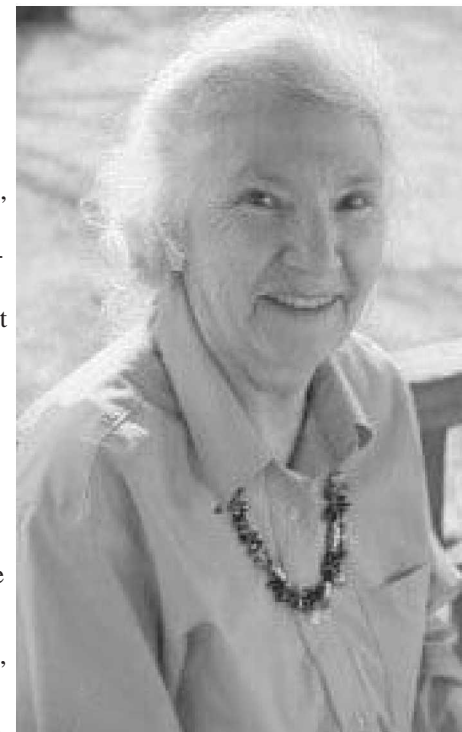
Carol Annia Meyer Yannacone and Victor J. Yannacone, Jr. were more than a married couple for many decades “they were a Suffolk County-based team in the environmental movement here and beyond.” Sadly, Carol, at 90, died last month. “My wife of 66 years passed away,” Victor emailed the couple’s many friends.

“She was an extraordinary woman who did much for many and she will be sorely missed.” Indeed, she will be. One of their important crusades was a legal challenge in the mid-1960s to the spraying of the pesticide DDT by the Suffolk County Mosquito Control Commission. The commission had for decades been dousing wetlands in Suffolk with massive amounts of DDT. Carol, a science teacher, in 1965 came upon a huge fish kill in Upper Yaphank Lake. She had grown up near the lake, swam in its waters and, as the *Newsday* obituary last month for Carol said, “developed a deep interest in the ecosystem of the lake.” Three years earlier, “*Silent Spring*” the landmark book by Rachel Carson had been published and exposed how DDT not only killed mosquitoes but much of other life, including marine life. Victor, with a law practice based in Patchogue, where the Yannacone’s also lived, brought a class action lawsuit in Supreme Court in Suffolk County. Its lead plaintiff: Carol. She was joined, the *Long Island History Journal* relates in an article titled “Long Island Women Preserving Nature and the Environment,” by the Brookhaven Town Natural Resources Committee. It included Suffolk environmentalists and scientists including Art Cooley, Dr. George Woodwell, Dr. Charles Wurster, Dr. Robert Smolker and Anthony Taormina.

Although the lawsuit was later to be dismissed in Supreme Court in Suffolk, they “won while losing” by “publicizing the problem,” said the article. “Suffolk County suspended, then banned DDT.” Then “New York State banned DDT in 1970 and DDT was banned nationwide in 1972.” Out of this battle came the Environmental Defense Fund, based for many years in Suffolk County, in East Setauket. Its headquarters now is in Manhattan with 14 more offices worldwide. It was Carol’s idea,” says Victor. “She conceived the idea in Atlantic City at a meeting of the Audubon Society, at which Victor gave what became noted as the ‘Sue The Bastards Speech.’ She and Victor were two of the 10 founders who signed the certificate of incorporation for the EDF. The initial judge in the DDT case was D. Ormonde Ritchie of Brightwaters, and it was in his court that what became the legal term “environmental law” was born. Justice Ritchie was asked by the attorney for the county, “What’s the basis for this lawsuit?” ecalled Yannacone. Then “the judge turned to me and asked, “Where should your adversary look this up?” I said, “Try environmental law.” The *New York Times* and other media covering the case described this as a new concept in law, which since then has become the name globally of a legal specialty. Another important case involving Victor and Carol was the litigation brought in 1979 involv-

ing the use of the herbicide Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. As the “*Living on Earth*” program on National Public Radio reported, in 1979 Yannacone was asked to file a lawsuit against the chemical companies that manufactured Agent Orange. Vietnam veterans who suffered from skin rashes, liver disorders, and soft tissue cancers claimed that their ailments resulted from exposure to the defoliant, which was used to deprive enemy troops of jungle cover. Agent Orange was contaminated with dioxin, one of the most toxic chemicals under the sun. Victor Yannacone barnstormed the country for five years and aggressively attacked the chemical companies for allegedly covering up the effects of dioxin. Meanwhile, relates an essay on the website of the Yannacone law firm, for years “Carol Annia Yannacone listened to and counseled the Vietnam combat veterans dying from the illness and disease resulting from their exposure to dioxin” during their service in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, But it was not just the veterans who looked to Carol for counsel

and support, it was their wives, girlfriends, parents, and children. She talked with them about their doctors and hospitals, their diagnosis and treatments, and listened to the problems they were facing at home, in the workplace and with the VA. Most of all Carol convinced them they were not alone and helped them network.” Carol,” it continues, “conducted intake interviews on more than 3,295 individual veterans, opened and managed their claim files, consulted with doctors and expert witnesses throughout the country and helped develop and maintain the CHAOS (Case Histories of Agent Orange Survivors) from which the information used to negotiate the [1984 Agent Orange \$180 million] settlement [for Vietnam War veterans] was ultimately derived.” The Yannacone’s traveled several years ago from Suffolk to Hawaii to visit their son, Victor J. Yannacone, III for Thanksgiving. Then the epidemic hit, of COVID-19 , and we were quarantined.’ We never got home,”. So now we’re stuck here in paradise,” Victor was telling me over the phone from Maui in 2022. And, in his mid-80s, with arthritis, ‘I don’t want to get on an airplane,’ with this condition and fly back. So, they remained in paradise. Carol died in a hospice near their home in Lahaina on February 23. She is survived by Victor; their son Victor; daughter Claire Yannacone, of Patchogue, a science teacher in Riverhead; and three grandchildren. And by good environmental works over many decades. =



Carol Annia Meyer Yannacone