

Obituary: Love of learning led Louanna Pettay to anthropology, then law

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Louanna Pettay, who taught herself the law with a correspondence course and took and passed the California bar exam on her first try, all while teaching anthropology at Sacramento State, died Sunday. She was 79.

Ms. Pettay was retired and divided her time between homes in Sacramento and Nesika Beach, Ore., where she died of cancer, said friend Leanne O'Neal.

She was a physical anthropology professor for 40 years, teaching at Ohio State University and Kent State University before joining California State University, Sacramento in 1968. Intensely curious, she had a sharp mind and an engaging teaching style that made her popular in the classroom, colleagues said.

"The students all thought she was wonderful," retired anthropology professor Donna Halstead said. "She was so bright and always had a lot of information on anything she was interested in."

Late in her teaching career, Ms. Pettay's interest turned to an academic pursuit inspired by memories of her father, a country lawyer. Choosing to become a lawyer through an alternative path allowed by the State Bar of California, she signed up for a correspondence course in law offered by La Salle University in Chicago. She was encouraged by O'Neal, then a student at McGeorge School of Law, who lent her casebooks on California law.

Ms. Pettay studied legal texts at night and on weekends for four years while teaching anthropology classes. At age 52, she took and passed the California bar exam in 1981. Her lack of a formal law school experience proved no obstacle, she said.

"I have never believed anyone could teach you anything," she told The Bee in 1981. "They can only point the way. My father said to learn law, all you need is a head and a book."

Ms. Pettay continued teaching at Sacramento State until she retired in 1992. As a lawyer, she donated her time to Legal Services of Northern California, represented charities and social causes pro bono and volunteered as a pro tem judge in Sacramento County small claims court.

"She loved the range of human emotions in small claims – dog owners suing groomers, brides unhappy with wedding dresses, landlords and tenants, all kinds of people," O'Neal said.

Louanna Pettay was born in 1928 in Cadiz, Ohio, to a lawyer and homemaker who reared two daughters. She received a bachelor's degree from Ohio State and earned master's and doctorate degrees in physical anthropology from Indiana University.

Engaged twice but never married, she enjoyed the freedom to pursue interests on her own terms. Enchanted by the Oregon coast, she bought a second home in Nesika Beach in 2002 and enjoyed gardening and kayaking. A love of dogs – especially her faithful standard poodle, Phoebe – led her to volunteer at animal shelters and travel to watch the Alaskan Iditarod and Canadian Yukon Quest sled races.

Ms. Pettay was a strong, intellectual woman with an open, non-judgmental mind and an easygoing manner, friends said. Her love of learning and success in becoming a lawyer impressed many colleagues.

"Knowing Louanna, (studying law) was just something really different and challenging to do," retired anthropology professor George Rich said. "She just wanted to embark on something brand new."