

Artist, Advocate Jill Finsen Is Dead

Accomplished artist, advocate for progressive issues and self-described “lonely, bitter, dogless, childless spinster,” Jill Finsen of Washington DC, Maine and sometimes Cape Cod died yesterday at age #. People often remarked, “She did not seem bitter to me.”

Her sister, Susan Finsen, confirmed her death.



Despite her self-deprecating humor, Ms. Finsen was long dedicated to the serious work of improving life for others through numerous nonprofits and volunteer work. She began her career in 1971 at UNICEF in the Boston area and concluded it 38 years later as a public policy director at AARP in Washington, DC, where she had responded to a want ad that neglected to mention the job included significant travel. She had a beloved 75-pound pooch named Hemingway, who had accompanied her to work at UNICEF. Luckily, good friends agreed to take the pooch when she travelled for work.

Her first AARP assignment was in the Deep South. Born and raised in New England, she hardly understood anyone’s Southern accent and was advised to gain cultural literacy by reading the sports pages before she staffed meetings. Although an athlete all her life, predominantly as a rower, Ms. Finsen had only attended annual high school Thanksgiving football games under duress.

Ms. Finsen’s life in the arts was no less committed. She first expressed her passion for art through black-and-white photography at age 10, using a Brownie camera. For decades in adulthood, she was an avid photographer and spent many hours processing film and prints in the darkroom. When she switched jobs at AARP, her new supervisor incorporated photographing the volunteers she supported to honor their participation—a dream job for her.

In 2000, Ms. Finsen began painting and, after retiring from AARP, moved to New York City in 2016 to earn her master’s degree in fine arts from The New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture. There, Dean Graham Nickson referred to Ms. Finsen as a colorist and

her work as “awkward and quirky, using bold color and flattened planes depicting the interplay of the familiar and imagined.” At 71, she was the oldest in her graduating class. Over the years, she exhibited in New England, New York, San Francisco and Washington, DC. Her images were used on the covers of books by Doris Lessing and Frederick Dürrenmatt, and she illustrated a children’s book about a Maine lobsterman’s orange bucket.

A lifelong jazz lover (though she had once been instructed to lip-sync upon her admission to the Day Dreamers singing group in junior high school), no visit to New York was complete for Ms. Finsen without evenings of music in the city’s storied venues.

Ms. Finsen was also an active proponent of keeping democracy alive in this country. Her family and friends likely tired of her regular invitations to participate in political activities designed to keep progressive democrats in power or get it back.

She had a passion for travel, and although her first overseas experience, to Greece in 1969, landed her on an island designated for political prisoners, the second sojourn involved living in the Matala, Crete, caves Joni Mitchell made famous in her song “Carey.” During that trip, she was with a less-than-desirable boyfriend who was arrested trying to cross an international border with hashish taped to his body. Paris was a favorite destination, where she was supposed to spend junior year abroad but got sidelined by poor collegiate advice.

In retirement, Jill escaped the summer heat of Washington, DC, and retreated to Maine and Cape Cod to paint, row and swim in the often-chilly New England waters. She was a member of the Deer Isle Artists Association for many years.

Jill Andrea Finsen was born May 10, 1947, in Newton, Massachusetts, to Gita (nee Brigitte Matilda Alma Landauer) Finsen, an honored volunteer, librarian and realtor whose family escaped from the Nazis in 1933 when Gita was 10, and Irving Finsen (nee Finkelstein), who headed Alps Sportswear Manufacturing Co. Her maternal great-grandmother Alma Heidenheim Metz was responsible for rescuing a number of Jewish friends from Nazi Germany. Her paternal grandfather Herbert Jacob Finkelstein left Vilna in 1906 to flee the Russian pogrom when he was 16.

Prior to her MFA, she received a bachelor’s degree from Elmira College and a master’s in library science from the State University of New York at Buffalo. Although never married, Jill had numerous close friends and one significant relationship, with Russell Bowen, who died in an automobile accident when the couple was living in Maine.

In addition to her sister, Ms. Finsen leaves two brothers, a niece and many cousins; her parents predeceased her. She will be interred with Hemingway at the columbarium her great-grandmother commissioned in 1933 at New York’s Woodlawn Cemetery. Many pioneers of jazz are buried there, and jazz concerts are given regularly. Ms. Finsen will be with the music she loved.