

In Memoriam: Channing Chase '60

A successful actress for 59 years, she enjoyed fine food and wine and traveling the world.

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UNH friends knew her as Valerie Waraska, but shortly after graduation and a brief stay in Boston, the aspiring actress moved to New York City, where she changed her legal name to Channing Chase.

A chance meeting with Pauline Kael, the late film critic for The New Yorker magazine, convinced Valerie that the name change was in order. According to her husband, Daniel Saxon, Kael took Valerie aside at a cocktail party and explained that an actress's name must reflect who and what they are. Out of what Daniel calls "a motherly chat" evolved the name Channing Chase, which seemed appropriately young and sophisticated.

A stunning green-eyed blonde, Channing soon became a fixture on national television commercials as diverse as Toyota, McDonald's, Discover Credit Cards and Glade, appearing in 126 commercials during her lifetime. She acted at New York's LaMaMa Theatre and then won a leading role in the touring company of the Neil Simon and Burt Bacharach musical, "Promises, Promises." Hollywood soon beckoned, and she relocated in 1982. More success followed, with roles in many television series, among them "Time of Your Life," "Murphy Brown," "Home Improvement," "Family Matters" and "General Hospital."

For three seasons, Channing was featured on "Mad Men" in the guest lead role of Dorothy Campbell, receiving an Emmy Award nomination for Outstanding Guest Actress in a Drama Series in the third year. Because the character she portrayed was slowly edging into dementia, it was a role that allowed her to "dig deep, as they call it in the acting world," says Daniel, and brought her widespread recognition.

Channing also was a founding member of the Pacific Resident Theatre, appearing in plays by Thornton Wilder and Edward Albee, whose work she especially admired. Several years ago, while she and Daniel were in New York to see one of Albee's plays on Broadway, Channing suddenly found herself surrounded by a group of young actors attending Juilliard. "They had seen her on 'Mad Men', admired her work and wanted to know more about the essence of the role," says Daniel. "She truly appreciated being recognized and spent the entire intermission with the students."

Channing and Daniel met at a yoga class in 1984. "From a distance, I constantly noticed this lovely, green-eyed beauty," Daniel recalls. Channing wore a ring on her left hand, so Daniel kept his distance, assuming she was married. One day, however, he says he couldn't keep himself from telling her she was "a very handsome woman." Soon after, he learned from their yoga instructor that Channing was single. Telephone conversations were soon followed by a dinner he prepared for her at his home. They were married within a year. Channing later confessed that although others had told her she was pretty, gorgeous or beautiful, she was impressed by the fact that no one else had ever called her "handsome."

Channing passed away unexpectedly in her sleep on Oct. 6, 2018. Her life had been a full one, both professionally and personally. Interest in her heritage and a love of travel culminated in a trip Channing and her sister Lorna Collins took to Lithuania to explore their family roots. Her favorite country, however, was Italy. For years, she and Daniel rented a summer home in the hills of Umbria, taking side trips throughout the country and occasionally traveling into France to enjoy Nice and St. Tropez.

"Italy appealed to us for a number of reasons — friendly, warm people, excellent food and wine," says Daniel. "Channing understood enough Italian to read road signs and

was a superb navigator while I did the driving.” She enjoyed chatting with the locals, he says, practicing her Italian “with a touch of New England accent included.”

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