



## Rita Helen Canfield

March 8, 1935 - June 5, 2020

Rita Helen Williamson Canfield died peacefully at home with her family on the evening of June 5, 2020 from complications related to Non-Hodgkins lymphoma and an on-going infection.

Rita, the daughter of Clair Williamson and Helen Johnston Williamson, was born in Wichita, Kansas, on March 8th, 1935. Her father was an electrical engineer who built power plants for local communities, and her mother worked for the Wichita Eagle newspaper. The family Rita knew as she grew up included, besides her brother and sister, two doting great aunts who lived nearby. She flourished in school. Her classmates in their large high school elected Rita to the Student Council every year.

After high school graduation she enrolled in the Wesley Hospital Nursing School and graduated in August, 1957. Those years were formative in that through the influence of the Nurses' Christian Fellowship Rita became an active Christian. At some point she had decided she wanted to serve as a missionary somewhere, and would probably not marry. Her involvement with Nurses Christian Fellowship gave that interest more focus and, through its emphasis on scripture study, more substance.

In spring 1956 Rita went to a weekend retreat with several members of her Nurses Christian Fellowship chapter and students from other universities. By chance Robert (Bob) Canfield attended the conference. He had spent two years as a teacher of English in Afghanistan and had completed a year studying linguistics at the University of Michigan; although he had planned to return to Afghanistan he was about to be drafted into the army. As part of the conference Rita led discussion of a Biblical passage and Bob was in her group. After the discussion the other folks in the group dispersed, but Rita and Bob stayed, sitting on a sunny patch of grass, and talked. That was the essence of their contact at the conference, two hours of a friendly conversation, but Bob made up his mind to pursue the relationship. Because he was soon inducted in the army his only means of contact was the mail. After corresponding for several months Bob wrote a letter of proposal. In her response Rita equivocated. Bob convinced himself there was still a

chance and continued writing letters. By the time he could see her again, the next August, Rita accepted an engagement ring. (When her classmates noticed the ring they drenched her in the shower fully clothed.)

Rita had one more year to graduate from nursing school. During that year, Wesley Hospital nominated her as their candidate in a statewide contest for the most outstanding nursing student. The Hospital also used Rita to model student life in an advertising brochure. All the photos produced during that period were cherished by her soon-to-be husband.

After graduating as an RN from nursing school, Rita traveled to Germany where Bob had been posted. They were married in Schweinfurt on September 21st, 1957.

Bob mustered out of the army in January. By that time he had accepted another teaching position in Afghanistan. When the couple arrived in Kabul, March, 1958, Rita was several months pregnant. She gave birth to their first child, Kim Lee, on September 12th, 1958. Two other children were born in Kabul, each 14 months apart, Howard Evan on November 5th, 1959, and Steven Jon on January 29th, 1961.

Rita loved Kabul. She and a friend explored the crafts and jewelry shops in the bazaar for fine examples of Central Asian artistry. During those years -- from March 1959 to December, 1963 -- Rita studied Afghan Persian, and became proficient enough to give a course in Persian in food hygiene for local Afghan women. She also worked in a small clinic/hospital sponsored by the American embassy for the American expatriates in the country and treated some mysterious individuals on behalf of the US Government.

The family moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, in January, 1964, where Bob entered a doctoral program in anthropology. Rita was active in lives of her children as a Cub Scout Den Mother and as a Brownie Mother and Girl Scout leader. During that time an issue arose that became deeply painful to Rita. She bore the brunt of a situation that challenged her faith and courage for many years; her prayers and fasts over this issue deeply enriched her appreciation for a Savior who suffered as we do.

After two years in Ann Arbor, the family moved back to Afghanistan for Bob to do field research. Rita turned out to have a critical role in his success. At one time she managed a feast for two dozen Pashtun tribal leaders -- preparations took three days. As a nurse Rita was often sought out for help by the sick. One time a man from the Hazara ethnic minority brought to the door his wife who suffered from tuberculosis. Rita's relationship with that family brought Bob into close connection with a number of Hazaras and opened up unique possibilities for anthropological research in that community. The information collected

among the Hazaras of Central Afghanistan nourished his writings, including his dissertation, for many years. In fall 1969 Bob took a teaching position at Washington University in St Louis. After a few years Rita decided to return to nursing, but felt her skills were rusty, so she applied to the Bachelor of Nursing program at St. Louis University. Having completed this degree she worked as a community nurse for a while, but eventually decided to apply to the master's degree program at St Louis University. She completed the degree in 1979, submitting a thesis on "Non Pharmacological Interventions for the Relief of Pain."

Rita began teaching nursing at Southern Illinois University -Edwardsville. During that time her department encouraged their faculty to pursue doctor's degrees, and Rita applied to an advanced program at Rush University in Chicago, where she could take courses full time in summer and do part-time work from home the rest of the year. She completed the Doctorate in Nursing Science degree in 2002, defending a dissertation entitled, "The Effect of Physical Activity on Psychological and Physiological Outcomes among Caregivers of Relatives with Dementia."

In 2013, Rita had a series of minor strokes, and a major one in October which were not diagnosed until early January, 2014, when a biopsy of her brain was taken: she had Non-Hodgkin's large B-cell lymphoma. Treatment at Barnes-Jewish Hospital enabled her to slowly regain skills and strength that had been lost in previous months. She was always grateful to the nurses, and sent so many flowers that the florist knew her by name. She did well for the next five years, but in the summer of 2019 there were indications that the lymphoma was reappearing.

Rita was a voracious reader throughout her life, especially of mysteries, which she often completed in a day. She loved plants and worked many days in the yard. She spent many afternoons at the Missouri Botanical Garden. Throughout Rita's time in St Louis she assisted the immigrant community – and remained close to Afghans. She made a point of walking every day and going for long walks in the woods several times a year. She was a life-long church member, most-recently as a member of the One Family Church. Many friends found her a loving listener; over the years she acquired a number of younger friends who adopted her as a kind of second mother.

She leaves behind her husband of 62 years, a daughter Kim Canfield Kackley of Boston MA, two sons, Howard Evan Canfield of Tucson AZ, and Stephen Jon Canfield of Hannibal, MO; also a sister, Myrna Scott of Newton, KS, and brother, C. Q. Williamson of Bethlehem, PA, and five grand-children: Christian, Joshua, Ariana, Benjamin, and Helen. Rita had many friends and "surrogate children" who adopted her through the years.

Memorial Service held Saturday, July 18, 2020 3:00 p.m. at One Family Church 4265 Shaw Blvd. St. Louis, MO 63110. To virtually watch Memorial Service, go to the following link, <https://youtu.be/sdSBC2pGprY>. Comments, pictures and recollections about Rita may be posted below this announcement on Facebook. In lieu of flowers, the family would prefer donations be made in honor of Rita to Non-Profit Organizations such as International Rescue Committee or Save the Children.

I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."

[Revelation 21:3-4]

# Cemetery

---

## Oak Hill Cemetery

10301 Big Bend Road  
Kirkwood, MO, 63122

# Events

---

**JUL** **Memorial Service** 03:00PM

**18**

---

One Family Church  
4265 Shaw Blvd, St. Louis, MO, US, 63110

# Comments

---



“ Jacque F. purchased the Meat & Cheese Sympathy Gift Crate for the family of Rita Helen Canfield.



Jacque F. - July 17, 2020 at 03:33 PM

---



“ Our long friendship began in 1958 when Rita and Bob moved to Kabul, Afghanistan. We were both young mothers and learning to survive and thrive in a new culture. She delivered Kim on Sept. 12, 1958 and I had our 2nd child a few weeks later on Sept. 29. It is hard to explain how much we depended on each other in the difficult circumstances of those days, but Rita's calm spirit, beautiful smile and loving patience weathered many a storm. Both had a good sense of humor and Bob, the linguist, gave us a hard time for our Boston accent, and Rita would tease me about the time I fell asleep kneeling at the morning prayer time they hosted. She was quick to help in times of need and I have a warm memory of Rita - 8 months pregnant herself - coaching and helping to deliver one of our sons.

During their later period in Kabul they took some vacation with us in Kandahar. As often happened, a car problem delayed their return and they had to stay over Christmas. Rita & I had to quickly find gifts for the kids and plan for meals. She accepted the changes gracefully and has always set an example of trusting the Lord in all circumstances. When she later persevered and earned her doctorate we were thrilled for her.

Over these many years we have stayed in close touch, meeting occasionally at an Afghan Reunion or during a visit to Boston to see Kim and the family. We were very sad when Rita began having strokes and ongoing medical problems. But her faith in the Lord stayed strong and I know she blessed many friends with hospitality and godly counsel. She, and Bob, have blessed us with their faithful prayers, gifts and encouragement for these many years. It has been a privilege to be her friend and I look forward to that day when we are reunited in Christ's heavenly kingdom.

With love and prayers to all the family,  
Jacquelyn Friberg

Jacquelyn Friberg - July 17, 2020 at 03:15 PM

---



“ I've known Rita since our Rush days when we both were finishing our dissertation. I just remember how dedicated she was to her studies and she quickly became one of my best supporters. Since those years, we've stayed in touch and I would always try to see her and Bob when I would come to visit my relatives in St. Louis. Those visits were full and memorable and I will cherish our time together. Despite her illnesses, she remained full of life and always had a smile. I am amazed at how much she accomplished in her life as I read through her life stories but I am not surprised. She wasn't one to talk much about herself but would always want to know what was going on with me. I don't think I have ever met anyone so humble, kind and generous as Rita .I will miss her dearly. Thank you, Bob, for being so flexible to bring her wherever we could meet up.  
Until we meet again,  
Maureen Rehwaldt

Maureen Rehwaldt - July 06, 2020 at 04:14 PM

---



“ I got to know Rita and Bob during my last couple of years of doctoral study at Washington University's anthropology program. I really really appreciate their kind support and encouragement over the years. I remember discussing my dissertation research with Rita during a nice lunch on campus. I remember, on a rainy day, they showed up during a fundraising event friends and I organized to support a good cause in Vietnam. There were so many beautiful moments. It was my honor to have known such a gracious and kind person as Rita.

Bob, my deepest condolences & prayers are with you and the whole family. May Rita Rest in Peace.

Jing Xu

Jing - June 27, 2020 at 08:16 PM

---



“ Jing Xu & Family purchased the Beautiful Dreams for the family of Rita Helen Canfield.



Jing Xu & Family - June 27, 2020 at 08:04 PM

---



“ \*Washington University in Saint Louis

SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Department of Internal Medicine

Division of Oncology

June 17, 2020

Mr. Robert Canfield 8121 Edinburgh Drive

Clayton, MO 63105

Dear Bob,

Please accept my deepest sympathy for your loss of Rita. Hopefully, medical science will find better answers for treating recurrent central nervous system lymphomas and their devastating complications. I am so sorry that she suffered so much over the last year or more and that we did not have better solutions for her nausea, infections, and shortness of breath.

It was such an honor to help take care of Rita over the last 6-1/2 years. Although she never completely recovered from the devastating neurologic complications present at the time of her initial diagnosis in 2014, she still seemed to exude such joy during her 5-1/2 years of remission. I know she absolutely "savored" every moment she had with you and your children, grandchildren, and close friends.

I will always remember Rita for her very endearing smile and charming demeanor. She had the most incredible ability to see the positive every day. Even at her lowest points, she never lost her wit or engaging personality. She had a way of making everyone around her feel appreciated and important. She never once forgot to thank me for her care. If there were more Rita's in this world, I am convinced we would not be in the dire situation of world strife that currently exists. We would all do well to emulate Rita.

I know Rita always very much appreciated all of the love, care, and support that you provided during her long illness, and she could not have gone on as long as she did without you. Your care was unparalleled, any expencnee. I know you will miss her tremendously. Hopefullv, all of vour wonderful memories of your many, many years together will provide some sense of comfort during the long times ahead.

My thoughts are with you and your children.

Warmest regards,

Nancy L. Bartlett, M.D.

Professor of Medicine

Koman Chair in Medical Oncology

**Bob Canfield** - June 27, 2020 at 02:38 PM



“ Dr Bartlett was one of the many superb physicians we dealt with at BarnesJewish Hospital. But she was the one we knew the best. We so much appreciated her professionalism and zeal to help Rita through her long ordeal. We came to appreciate her and enjoy her as a warm and genuine person. To receive this letter was a special honor and joy. Thank you, Dr Bartlett, for your thoughtful note.

**Bob** - June 27, 2020 at 02:45 PM



“ We first met Bob and Rita at One Family Church several years ago. We were all part of a Sunday morning prayer meeting that met before the service. That was where we learned of their involvement in missions in Afghanistan and their ongoing interest in praying for the impact of the gospel and the needs of the church throughout the world. Their presence was an encouragement to pray with a wider view and urgency for the needs of the world. Rita was faithful to bring to our attention specific needs that we might not have otherwise been aware of such as the children suffering from malnutrition in Yemen.

Her good humor was in view as she would tease Bob about his wheelchair-pushing skills as he brought her into the side auditorium at the Tivoli Theater where we met. The sloping aisle did create some challenges for him in getting her to a good spot and securely set in place. It was always a

When we visited Rita in the hospital she was always interested to hear what we were doing and how our children were faring. They had met our oldest son on several occasions and Rita would often ask what he was doing and what his plans are. In the midst of her own suffering she continued to be an encouragement to us and to others.

We are grateful for the short time we knew Rita and thank God for her fruitful and faithful life.

Narci and Glenn Herr

**Narci Herr** - June 27, 2020 at 12:28 PM

---



“ From: Fahim Masoud

The passing of Dr. Rita jaan has profoundly saddened me and Zohra. Dr. Rita was a huge part of my life. She was so wonderful and kind. It's impossible for any person who even met her once not to have been impacted positively by her. She always made everyone feel welcomed and important and relevant. She was so proud of her family. Because of her deep interest in my affairs, I always would be so excited to call her and tell of a new development in my life.

We will miss her so much. She loved life and she lived very meaningfully. You were always great with her and so patient, professor. She loved you — and often talked to me behind your back. She once told me that you were a prince among men.

While that is true, what I know is that Dr. Rita was a queen among women. I'm getting emotional as I'm writing this because it's hard to imagine the world without her. We miss her and we loved her dearly.

Our condolences & prayers are with you and the whole family, Professor Canfield.  
May  
Dr. Rita jaan, Rest in Peace.

**Bob Canfield** - June 25, 2020 at 08:32 PM



“ This is such a special note to me and the family. Fahim was indeed close to Rita. He often called after work to chat and inevitably his target was Rita. Somehow Rita was the person he wanted to share his world with. We always considered Fahim and Zohra among our closest friends. The night she passed, after I had notified the family I called Fahim, and within minutes Zohra had called. We are thankful for such precious friends.  
Thanks, Fahim for such a nice note about "Dr. Rita Jaan".

**Bob** - June 25, 2020 at 08:37 PM

---



“ I have known Rita since my time at Washington University in the late 1970s. I remember her kind hospitality to me and other students. We would eat many a Sunday dinner at the Canfield home, usually in the company of international students, for whom she had a particular concern. A blessing from this time was the friendship of her daughter, Kim, who was the same age as I. The last semester of college, I had no place to live, and Bob and Rita invited me to stay with them. Rita was a kind and gentle woman who showed her love in many ways. I believe she lived out her relationship with God by showing love and compassion to others. She was a woman of prayer. Many times I was struck by the sincerity and perseverance of her prayers. They revealed her deep trust in God and a life that had endured tests and suffering.

When I got engaged in grad school, Rita and Bob were the first we told (after our parents). Rita and Kim drove all the way to Oklahoma for our wedding! After the wedding, the Canfield home was a frequent stopover on our travels back and forth across the country. Dick and I both remember being greeted at the kitchen door with a tall glass of orange juice if we were showing any signs of a cold. Rita and Bob were with us at the baptism of our firstborn just before we went overseas.

Through the years Rita remained a steadfast friend, encourager, and confidant. To both of us, she was a model for living a Christian life. We will miss her a lot!

**Kathy Johnson** - June 20, 2020 at 05:24 PM



“ This is beautiful, Kathy. Those were precious times. We miss them. You are too far away.  
Bob

**Bob** - June 21, 2020 at 08:06 PM

---



“ 3 files added to the album Memories of Rita



**Kathy Johnson** - June 20, 2020 at 04:56 PM

---



“ My sister Rita was one of the kindest, most caring, and genuinely good people that I have ever known. From a very early age she lived her life in service to others. Rita was a people person and her friendly, open nature drew others to her. Rita was also a wonderful confidant and she always found time to reach out a hand to help in times of need. I could not have asked for a more loving, helpful, and caring sister.

One of the blessings of our later years was that we had time to reconnect. A very special memory is our trip alone together exploring New York City. We were probably lost more than we were found; but we had much fun exploring the city together and madly laughing when we inevitably got on the wrong train but somehow managed to eventually get to the right place. Rita will live on in my memories of moments like those.

It is with joy that I celebrate the life of my beloved sister. She was quite an accomplished woman but most importantly she was a wonderful wife, a loving mother, and a dedicated sister to CQ and me. Myrna (Williamson) Scott

**Myrna Scott** - June 18, 2020 at 10:34 AM

---



“ I had the pleasure of being in the same doctoral class as Rita at Rush University. We shared so many experiences both inside and outside the classroom/library. Rita and I would often walk each morning around the block outside Cook County Hospital. During these walks we shared many views about life and faith. Rita was an incredible listener and friend. She and Bob were very supportive of me as I experienced a health issue during our third summer of study. I value having known her as a friend/colleague.

Alice Swan

**Alice Swan** - June 16, 2020 at 01:21 PM

---



“ I was saddened to hear of Rita's passing. I knew Rita during her graduate years at Rush and we kept in touch afterwards. Working with Rita on her dissertation was one of the highlights of my career. I have her bound dissertation on my shelf, along with the many thoughtful, reflective books she passed along to me over the years. Each Christmas, I think of Rita when unwrapping the ornaments she shared with our family. And then there's the lovely mug your son made on our shelf! So many fond memories of Rita...

-Jan Zeller

**Jan Zeller** - June 15, 2020 at 05:29 PM

---



“ I only met her two times - both in the hospital where she had such courage and hope based on her faith in our Lord Jesus Christ so I know where she is now - in that room our Lord prepared for her in the Father's House - waiting for all of us who do or will believe in the reports of our Lord's resurrection and - that He died for our sins and lived that perfect life for us and now will come for each of us and take us to be with Him and with Rita. Karl Kindt

**Karl Kindt** - June 15, 2020 at 09:22 AM

---



“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



**Evan Canfield** - June 13, 2020 at 03:51 PM

---



“ 1 file added to the album Memories of Rita



**Bob** - June 13, 2020 at 10:14 AM



“ Rita, your beautiful smile always warmed a room. You will be missed in the prayer room. You had such compassion for so many people. We will see you again in heaven as we praise our Lord together with songs of joy. Love you and miss you.

**Moniqui C** - July 10, 2020 at 04:10 PM