



Nancy M. Mulnix

Born: November 26, 1939

Death: N/A

Nancy Middlesworth Mulnix was born in Flint, MI. After moving two other times, when she was 17 years old and beginning her senior year in high school, Nancy's family moved to East Grand Rapids. She has one younger sister who was born in 1942.

When Nancy arrived at East Grand Rapids High School, she was informed by the principal that her National Honors Society membership was not transferable. However, Nancy argued that it was and won. She then became involved in student politics and social events. She graduated tenth in her class and was elected to the East Grand Rapids Honors Society for her contributions to the school.

Nancy went to Drake University in Des Moines, IA, for two years and then transferred to Michigan State University. During her junior year, Nancy was asked by one of her teachers, Elizabeth Drews, to assist her in her research of the aspirations of gifted women. "Nobody was talking science. Nobody was saying I think I'll do law. They were just choosing those mothering vocations. But they were very uniform in saying that they didn't want to be like their mothers," said Nancy. "America [was] totally undemocratic at the time."

At the same time she was involved in this research, Lee Mulnix was asking Nancy to marry him. She said, "I don't really know why I did. I still do not know to this day." Nevertheless, on Christmas day 1959, Nancy and Lee were married, and Nancy dropped out of college.

In 1960, their first child, Bobby, was born. In 1961, their daughter Cissie was born. Son Michael was born in 1965, and daughter Susan was adopted in 1971. By 1977, Nancy and Lee were divorced.

During the 1960s, Nancy was also very involved in the community. She was the founder of the Little League of Mary Free Bed. She also served on the Mary Free Bed Guild, the Jr. League, the

education committee of the Art Museum, and Friends of Art. For 3 years, she was in a Civic Theatre touring group that performed in schools throughout Kent County.

In 1966, when she was 27 years old, Nancy became involved in perhaps her most well known community project—the installation of an Alex Calder stabile on what has become known as the Calder Plaza in downtown Grand Rapids. At the time she was vice president of the Friends of Art, which was sponsoring the women’s committee show of twentieth century American painting culture. As a guide the committee was using a book by Henry Galzeller, who at the time was the New York Metropolitan curator of American painting and sculpture.

Nancy had written the author, inviting him to speak at the event, and he accepted her invitation. Nancy picked up Galzeller at the airport and took him on a tour of downtown. Urban renewal had started in the early 1960s, according to Nancy, as a result of the interstate highway system. Cities needed to improve their infrastructure because of their growing populations. Consequently, at the time, when Nancy showed Galzeller the VandenBerg Center, she actually pointed out only a huge hole in the ground.

Nevertheless, Galzeller envisioned a piece of sculpture there and suggested that Nancy write Jerry Ford, who at the time was the minority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives. Galzeller, who at the time served on the advisory committee on visual arts for the newly formed National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), told Nancy that the organization was thinking about making some grants for just such an idea.

In April 1967 Nancy sent her letter and received a response 2 weeks later in the form of verbal approval from the first chair person of the NEA, Roger Stevens. Her letter had been supported by Ford, who controlled the money that supported the NEA. The matching grant was for \$45,000 with the stipulations that the artist had to be a living American and the piece had to be designed for permanent display on the site.

Once the commission committee was formed, Nancy was the first person to mention Calder’s name. She wanted the work to be big and assessable to the people who owned it; namely, Grand Rapidsians. Since she was 10 years old, Nancy had liked Calder’s work. This project, according to Nancy, was a first for the country: private and public funds “coming together to commission an original work of art for a very specific civic site.”

Calder agreed to do the work for \$150,000, including shipping and handling. In the end, the cost was \$127,900. This money was raised mostly by contributions from small foundations. “So this really came about through contributions and the interest of the people,” said Nancy. In 1969, she took part in the dedication ceremony.

In 1978, Nancy graduated from Aquinas College with a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy. In the summer 1978, she became estranged from all her children, except eight-year-old Susan. By 1980, she had earned her master’s degree in Psychology from Notre Dame.

Mother and daughter moved to Chicago, and from 1981 – 1983, Nancy worked at the University of Illinois Center for Cranial Facial Abnormalities. In 1983, they moved to West Palm Beach, FL, to be closer to her parents. From 1983 – 1985, Nancy studied and worked part time with Hospice at a “big hospital,” Menninger’s, Memorial Sloan Kettering, and St. Christopher’s House in London. In 1985 she became a full-time employee for the cancer center of the “big hospital.”

In 1991, with the unexpected death of her oldest child, Bobby, who was only 30 years old at the time, she left that position and moved back to Grand Rapids. No known cause of death was ever determined. That summer, Nancy did somewhat reconcile with her other children, including Susan, who in 1987, then 16 years old, moved back to Grand Rapids to live with her father.

From 1991 to 1993, Nancy was unable to find work because she either was overqualified or had the wrong credentials. So in 1993, a year before this interview, she had returned to school in the nursing program at Grand Valley State University. At the time of the interview, she planned to graduate by 1995.

In 1994, Nancy was 55 years old. She was involved in planning the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Calder. As the interview ended, Nancy reflected on her life thus far, and the following two excerpts are part of what she had to say:

I’m very concerned about how I’m going to support myself because I may end up one of those poverty-stricken, divorced women who spent 20 years in a marriage with no return, no social security, no pension, no health insurance.

I’m glad to be back in Grand Rapids. It’s where my heart has always been, and I will continue to try to be the mother of my children. Perhaps someday they will recognize me as their mother.

#### Other Resources

<http://grplpedia.grpl.org/wiki/images/1/1d/001.pdf>

