Dr. Catherine M. Wilfert

July 26, 1936 – September 13, 2020

Dr. Catherine M. Wilfert, a pioneer in the field of pediatric AIDS and a relentless advocate for children, died at her home outside Chapel Hill, NC on 13 September from idiopathic pulmonary disease. She is survived by her devoted husband and colleague of 49 years, Dr. Samuel L. Katz; her daughters from her first marriage, Katie C. Regen and Rachel A. Wilfert; Sam’s children from his first marriage, whom she considered her own, John L. Katz (Beryl), David L. Katz (Thu), Deborah S. Miora, Bill L. Villa-Katz (Michelle), Susan J. Calderon-Boyd (Dick), and Penelope J. Facher; 17 grandchildren; and her brother, Michael Minock (Sharon). She was preceded in death by her parents, Betty and Daniel Minock, Sam’s eldest son Samuel L. Katz Jr., and by her sister-in-law Maxine Morse.

Dr. Wilfert graduated with distinction from Stanford University in 1958 and summa cum laude from Harvard Medical School in 1962--one of just five female medical students in her class. Following medical school, Dr. Wilfert interned under the direction of Nobel Laureate Dr. John Enders, the father of modern vaccines, at Children’s Hospital in Boston before joining the faculty of Duke University School of Medicine in 1969, where she eventually became the Division Chief of Pediatric Infectious Diseases, a position she held until the 1990s. She also taught pediatrics and microbiology at Duke.

Dr. Wilfert’s greatest legacy in medicine, however, is the groundbreaking research she did in pediatric HIV prevention. In 1987, after the FDA approved AZT to treat the AIDS virus, Wilfert spearheaded the Pediatric Aids Clinical Trials at Duke. She posited that reducing the virus load in the blood of infected mothers would, in turn, expose their babies to a smaller amount of the virus, thus reducing HIV transmission from mother to child. In just three years, Dr. Wilfert achieved a 90% reduction in mother-to-child transmission of HIV in North Carolina. This was followed by similar efforts in the U.S. and around the world, leading to a 47%
decrease in new infections globally. Duke has credited Wilfert with reducing mother-to-child transmission of HIV by 75% in the United States.

In 1996 Dr. Wilfert joined the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation (EGPAF), where her primary role was reviewing grant applications and awarding funds to Elizabeth Glaser Scientist recipients and other researchers. Then in 1999, she directed EGPAF’s first international project, A Call to Action, shepherding grants to programs in Thailand, South Africa, Kenya, Cameroon, and Uganda. Over the next decade, Dr. Wilfert would make more than sixty trips to Africa and Asia in her tireless crusade to prevent mother-to-child HIV transmissions around the world.

Two awards that came in the last year of her life were particularly meaningful to Dr. Wilfert. She was a 2019 recipient of The North Carolina Award, the state’s highest civilian honor, for her contribution to Science in her adopted state; and the Infectious Disease Society of America’s D.A. Henderson Award for Outstanding Contributions to Public Health, named after the late epidemiologist who directed the international effort to eradicate smallpox.

Dr. Wilfert will be readily remembered for her significant contributions to the field of pediatric infectious diseases, however, Cathy, as she was known to her friends and family, was a remarkable renaissance woman who balanced a demanding career in a male-dominated field while being an extraordinary life partner and a supportive and loving mother. Following her retirement from EGPAF, Cathy focused her still formidable energy on her 17 grandchildren and a multitude of creative pursuits. She delighted in filling her three-acre garden with hundreds of flowering perennials, bulbs, and as many dogwood and redbud trees as she could transplant from the woods; collecting more beloved North Carolina pottery; sewing and quilting; taking photography classes; studying birds; and enjoying regular Saturday morning visits to the farmer’s market, where she was simply known as Cathy, a passionate gourmet cook always looking for interesting ingredients. Despite living in Chapel Hill for over 50 years, beware the person who mistook her
for a Carolina fan—she was a Duke Basketball fan extraordinaire, rarely missing a home game in 40+ years.

A lifelong athlete, Cathy was one of the first female lifeguards in Los Angeles in the 1950s (though she needed a male friend to literally tip the scale in order to meet the minimum weight requirement); she swam on the Stanford women’s intramural swim team; trounced her male medical school classmates on the tennis courts; and became a competitive “senior’ road race competitor in her 40s, regularly winning her age group in 10Ks. She was a talented photographer and a lifelong journaler, describing (mis)adventures during a summer trip to Europe with two medical school classmates in 1960, and, later, lovingly portraying the many children she met at clinics during her trips to Africa.

Cathy was quiet and humble, with twinkling blue eyes and an unassuming, warm demeanor. Growing up in southern California as the daughter of two public school teachers/administrators, Cathy was instilled with the value of education and a duty to pay it forward through mentoring and collaboration. In particular, she strived to support younger women working in medicine and public health, providing encouragement to speak up for what is right, even if it is not the popular or easy opinion.

The family would like to thank Will Dealy, Heather Sanders, Jenifer Jacobs, Maxine Foster, Mike Kubin and UNC Hospice for their exceptional care of Cathy.

Cathy greatly admired poet Maya Angelou, who once said, "If you’re going to live, leave a legacy. Make a mark on the world that can’t be erased.” Cathy Wilfert certainly made her mark on the world—and the world is infinitely better for it.

Per Cathy’s wish, there will be no memorial service - she suggested a cocktail party instead. As a result of current COVID-19 restrictions, a cocktail party to celebrate Cathy’s rich life will take place in Summer 2021.

In remembrance of Cathy, donations may be made to the endowment fund for the Catherine Wilfert, MD, Fellowship in Pediatric Infectious Diseases, at Duke
University’s Department of Pediatrics, which will support the training of fellows in pediatric infectious diseases, particularly those interested in global health.