



## Sylvia Rae Frey

May 3, 1935 - June 23, 2021

Lafayette -

Sylvia Frey, a renowned Tulane University history professor whose relentless curiosity and passionate scholarship led her to expand her initial field of expertise, early American history, into topics such as Black churches and the evolving roles of women, died Wednesday at her niece's home in Lafayette of complications from viral encephalitis. She was 86.

“She didn’t stay in the path that had been carved out for her,” said Lawrence Powell, a fellow history professor at Tulane. “She was right up on the current of historiography that was changing with the speed of curiosity. ... She grew as the field grew.”

A Eunice native who received academic honors on both sides of the Atlantic, Frey was a prolific author whose books and articles for scholarly journals covered such subjects as women in pre-industrial America, slave revolts and British military justice in the 18th century.

“If you didn’t want to do hard work, you didn’t want to be around Sylvia,” said Rebecca Mark, a former Tulane colleague of Frey’s and director of Rutgers University’s Institute for Women’s Leadership. Through Frey’s teaching and writing, often about subjects that hadn’t received much attention from many historians, “she was helping us see,” Mark said. “It might have been harder

than what we could see at the moment, but she took us along with her.”

“Her life was one of constant intellectual growth,” said Sam Ramer, a fellow history professor at Tulane. “She had a capacity for growth that none of us could have expected at the beginning of her academic career, which included writing about the British army in the American Revolution,” Ramer said. “That isn’t common in academics. ... She made herself into a really worldly intellectual.”

Wherever she went, Frey made friends and built networks. For instance, she was a founder of Nola4Women, a nonprofit organization designed to spotlight women’s contributions to New Orleans and help women achieve their potential. And her passion for racial justice brought Frey, a White woman, into contact with many Black people and their organizations. On Fat Tuesday mornings, Frey was on hand to cheer friend Cherice Harrison-Nelson, maroon queen of the Guardians of the Flame, as she marched with her tribe of vividly garbed Mardi Gras Indians.

“She was a little powerhouse,” said Harrison-Nelson, who befriended Frey after they participated in a Tulane symposium. “She was loyal. If she couldn’t give you the answer, she would point you in the right direction.”

Frey earned an undergraduate degree at the College of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau. After taking time out to teach high school, she earned a master’s degree at LSU and a doctorate at Tulane.

The time she spent teaching high school was invaluable, Ramer said, because she developed classroom skills in presenting lessons and supporting students. That paid off when she was working with collegians.

When Frey joined Tulane’s history faculty in 1969, she was the only woman in the department, Powell said. By the time she retired in 2009, “she was the prominent historian in the department, and she had made a tremendous name

for herself.”

Frey evolved as the field of history evolved and historians started asking questions about such matters as the roles that African Americans and women played in the country’s past, said Pamela Tyler, a retired history professor at the University of Southern Mississippi. Frey was Tyler’s dissertation director at Tulane.

“She kept pace,” Powell said. “She was exceptional. She was a real trouper. She was always interested in seeing something new.”

Frey received fellowships from a host of organizations, including the Smithsonian Institution and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, and she taught at Rice University, the University of Richmond and the University of Cambridge. Cambridge’s Newnham College named her an honorary fellow.

In light of her research on slavery, Frey served for many years on the Slave Routes Committee of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and she organized several of its international conferences.

At Tulane, Frey was the founding director of the Deep South Regional Humanities Center, which established a lecture series bearing her name. It was the predecessor of the New Orleans Center for the Gulf South. Mortar Board, a society for college seniors, gave her its Outstanding Teacher Award in 1976. In that same year, she was made a member of Omicron Delta Kappa, which recognizes campus leadership.

In Frey’s work with students, “she was a perfectionist with a formidable intellect and expectations to match,” said Emily Clark, a Tulane history professor whom Frey advised when Clark was working on a doctorate. “And

yet,” Clark said, “she was one of the tenderest, most generous beings on the planet. To see Sylvia with a stray cat or a friend in need was revelatory to those of us who knew her first as a fierce and brilliant historian. I had the good fortune to have known Sylvia first as a professional mentor who pushed me beyond what I imagined I could ever do, and later as a loving friend who told me that I was working too hard and needed to get some rest.”

Survivors include a sister, Dorothy Frey Meyers, of Eunice.

Cypress Funeral Home & Crematory, 206 West Lafayette St., Maurice, LA. 70555, (337) 740-3123, is in charge of arrangements.