

Obituary

Karen Ann Shafer, PhD

July 26, 1943 – March 17, 2026

Karen Ann (Henderson) Shafer died peacefully on March 17, 2026 in Lincoln City, Oregon after a long, valiantly-fought battle with cancer. She was 82 when she left her earthly body and moved to her eternal home with Jesus.

Karen was born on July 26, 1943 in Chicago, Illinois to her parents Glenn Walter Eugene Henderson and Helen Eleanor (Larson) Henderson. She had two older siblings, her brother, Richard G. Henderson (14 yrs older) and her sister, Nancy Helen Henderson Mulcahy (12 yrs older).

Karen's mom died when she was just nine years old. Her father remarried two years later (1954) to Elaine Roberta Henderson, and they moved to the mountains outside of Boulder, Colorado. Growing up, Karen had a very special relationship with her father; Karen described him as the "personification of love" and he lovingly called her "Pal." She also was a lover of dogs and was especially fond of little Tippy.

Karen lived with her family in Boulder until she went to college at Western State College in Gunnison, Colorado, where she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1965 in Speech, Drama and English. She then obtained a Master of Science degree in 1968 from the University of Oregon in Eugene.

Karen began her teaching career at Medford Mid High School in Medford, Oregon. When the opportunity arose, she obtained a faculty position in 1968 at Southern Oregon State College (now Southern Oregon University) in Ashland, Oregon in the Communications Department. While there Karen began studies for her PhD degree at University of Oregon, and in 1988 received her PhD in Rhetoric and Public Address. Her dissertation was on Communication and Friendship, which is incredibly fitting since she was such a good friend to countless people.

During her distinguished 34-year career at Southern Oregon University, Karen was a Professor of Speech Communication and taught courses such as public speaking, persuasion, interpersonal communication, small group communication and debate speech methods in education. From 1991 through 2002, she served as chair of the Department of Communication. She was a model of leadership for the university and the region, serving as a debate coach and director of forensics, a teacher education committee member and resource, vice president of the Oregon Speech Communication Association, an active member of the Northwest Communication Association, and president of the SOU faculty union. Karen was described as dedicated, forward-thinking, and optimistic. She was praised for fostering stability at SOU and for putting into practice her exemplary skills of communication and leadership. She continued at SOU as Professor Emerita after her retirement in 2002 until her death in 2026.

Wedding Bells! During her early years as a faculty member at SOU, Karen met her "beloved" Joe Cadman Shafer. Joe started working for SOU in 1970 as a Music Professor (piano). He and Karen met at a singles group for faculty members. Karen shared that she broke her ankle while cutting Christmas trees. Before the singles group met one day, Joe stopped by her office to check on her and found that she couldn't get around well. So he helped Karen get to the singles group and that started their dating journey. Karen and Joe were married on August 22, 1971 at Ashland Congregational Church. Joe and Karen lived in Talent, Oregon for 21 years and enjoyed gardening together on their $\frac{3}{4}$ -acre farm. They grew all sorts of fruit and vegetables and also had a Golden Retriever. They then lived in Ashland for nine years.

In 1990 Karen and Joe bought a beautiful oceanfront lot just south of Lincoln City, Oregon. After Karen retired in 2002, they had a home built there and moved into their new home in Coronado Shores in 2004. Joe and Karen enjoyed a stunning ocean view right outside their living & dining room

windows, and were blessed with the always present soothing and exhilarating crashing of the waves, all sorts of sea life (whales, seals, pelicans), and ever-changing and breathtaking sunsets. They continued their tradition of growing vegetables (albeit a much smaller garden this time) and had a monthly ritual of making fresh bread together. Karen never tired of listening to Joe's beautiful piano music. She affectionately referred to Joe as, "my beloved."

Karen was active in her retirement and invested herself in people and things that mattered most to her. She immediately got involved in Gleneden Beach Christian Church and poured herself into ministry there. She faithfully attended services, led prayer meetings, joyfully volunteered for many outreaches, and served on the church board. Ever the teacher, she also delivered Sunday messages when Pastor Carl was gone. She served with humility, wisdom, love and effectiveness.

Even though she "retired" from her teaching career at SOU, she continued her commitment to be a life-long learner. Karen was interested in disaster preparedness and joined the local Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) in 2009. As an active member of the Depoe Bay Fire District CERT planning team, Karen brought a fresh perspective and encouraged continual improvement of the program. She helped develop a CERT Operating Manual and Skills Certification process. She also taught some of the CERT classes. Karen was exceptionally good at devising role playing exercises to help CERT members improve their skills. For years, Karen supported the local high school students in their Teen CERT classes, helping with their Skills Certification activities and their disaster simulation drills. She taught at the Oregon Coast Community College during retirement as well.

Karen had rich, deep and authentic friendships in every corner of her life. She was fully invested in sharing life with her dear neighbors in Coronado Shores, some in the daily walking group, others on the safety & preparedness committee and still with others in the Book Club, to name a few. She had regular getaway adventures and camping trips with her close friends Dorothy & DeeAnn, and tea parties/lunches with her closest CERT buddies. She was a faithful and reliable friend and mentor to many - a rock. She took good care of herself physically, staying active and working out at the gym.

Karen was diagnosed with cancer nearly ten years ago. She was determined to make her cancer journey benefit as many people as possible, so she participated in numerous research studies for Breast and Lung cancer patients. For many years she was a participant in the local Breast Cancer Support group, and her fellow members found her advice and guidance immensely valuable and inspirational. Her courage and strength was legendary.

The most significant thing to share about Karen was that she was a fully-devoted follower of Jesus Christ. I don't say that lightly. She was a student of The Bible, and was full of wisdom as a result. Karen was not only a hear-er of the word, but a do-er. She emulated Jesus's charge to his followers on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) to be servants and show generous love without seeking reward or acknowledgment. Karen was a faithful and dependable mentor to many. She was an encourager. She gave freely of her time, skills, energy, wisdom, and resources. She lived a life of kingdom purposes and her actions were bathed in God's love. A Bible verse that she was particularly fond of was, 1 John 4:7, Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loves is born of God, and knows God. Her unwavering dedication to Jesus was evident in the way she lived to the very end. (Ps 116: 15, "*Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His godly ones.*").

Karen is survived by her husband of 54 years, Joe Shafer, and her nephew and niece, RJ and Cathy Mulcahy. Karen's parents and siblings all preceded her in death.

In lieu of flowers, memorial gifts can be sent to Gleneden Beach Community Church (PO Box 496, Gleneden Beach OR 97388) to help purchase new chairs for the new sanctuary. Karen would have loved this!

The following tribute of Karen's contributions to Southern Oregon University and its students was included in the 2002 SOU Commencement Program:

If you have ever made a left turn at the light on Mountain Avenue and Siskiyou Boulevard, you have Karen Shafer to thank. Her small group communication students regularly had assignments to identify and solve campus problems. Working with the Oregon Department of Transportation to install a light at that corner was just one of their projects.

In 1965, Karen earned her bachelor of arts degree from Western State College in Colorado. Three years later, she received her master of science degree from the University of Oregon. She also earned her PhD in Rhetoric and Public Address from the UofO in 1988.

Karen retired after a distinguished career at Southern Oregon University dating back to 1968, including service as chair of the Department of Communication from 1991 through 2002.

Fair, forward-thinking and frank, she led her department through an era of significant change as it grew in majors and offerings, refined its mission and programs, assumed new challenges and responsibilities at the Medford campus and experienced a dramatic change in faculty.

Karen fostered stability and optimism in a period that could well have produced discouragement and cynicism. She practiced the skills of leadership and communication she had so effectively taught her students for 33 years.

As a faculty colleague, she was a model of leadership for the university and the region, serving as a debate coach and director of forensics (which sent her to 20 tournaments her first year), a teacher education committee member and resource, vice president of the Oregon Speech Communication Association for 11 years, an active member, secretary and promoter of the Northwest Communication Association, and member, secretary and president of the SOU faculty union.

Her teaching reflected clearly the history of her field. A communication generalist, Karen taught such courses as public speaking, persuasion, advanced public speaking, interpersonal communication, small group communication and debate speech methods in education.

Seeing the necessity of expanding students' knowledge in the field of communication she created such courses as communication in the women's movement, classroom communication, campaign rhetoric, interviewing and listening and advanced interpersonal communication. She also developed a strong speciality and new courses in the field of her PhD dissertation -- communication and friendship -- and supervised seniors in their work on capstone projects.

Karen had nine different offices in four different buildings on the SOU campus during her career at the university, several with no windows or ventilation. Still, her performance outpaced her surroundings. She left her department housed in a facility that promotes the very collegiality she fostered and promoted as colleague and chair.

One of her colleagues remarked that "Karen does what we all should do but often don't. She reads and rereads text chapters, reads journal and convention papers, takes short courses, seeks guidance from colleagues and thinks before she speaks. She serves as an example of what we should respect and be."

Three of her colleagues from SOU contributed sentiments for Karen's Celebration of Life service:

From Tom Pyle (Professor in the Communications Department):

I hope this gets to you in time to help you tell others about the Karen that those of us who worked with her knew, respected and thought so highly of. She was a model for us all, as a colleague and leader. After all, we elected and reelected her to our chair over and over and over again. That never happened with any other department member, including yours truly. I, for one, know I never worked with or knew a better person.

From Susan Walsh, (who, after serving with Karen in the Department of Communication, became provost and then interim president of the university before retiring):

In addition to chairing through challenging times, I believe Karen was also the longest serving chair (ten years?) in the department. She was always steadfast in her dedication and commitment to our faculty and students, and a tireless advocate on our behalf. An important part of her legacy will be serving as host for many years to regional high school speech and debate students -- including planning and organizing annual tournaments -- because she believed so strongly that good communication skills were key to achieving a life with purpose. Lastly, Karen led a robust life in retirement, remaining active in the church and teaching community college courses. She will be missed by many.

From Jon Lange (Communication professor):

Karen was the first SOU (SOSC) person I saw when I interviewed for a job in 1980! We were colleagues from then until her retirement and I don't remember her EVER missing a day, a meeting, a task she took on; that is, she worked hard and you could always count on her. She chaired the department through challenging times and always with grace and good humor. Fairness and kindness were two values she held. She was a good listener, modeling what she taught. She never took herself too seriously but always treated her work with respect, fully committed to making the student experience as positive and productive as possible. Her advisees were grateful to have her. She was simply a fine person.

Gleneden Beach Christian Church Tribute

Karen Shafer's Ministry

Soon after becoming a member of GBCC Karen served on the church board. One of the first challenges the church faced was finding a new pastor, for which she participated on the pastoral search committee conducted in 2005.

Karen continued to serve on the board as Church Clerk for more than 8 years and then as Vice Chair for more than 12 years. During board meetings Karen's giftedness in wisdom and discernment were unmistakable as she made sure board members were weighing all viewpoints before decisions were made.

As a pastor, Carl is grateful for the many times Karen had his back when the church was faced with difficult circumstances and decisions.

Karen's passion for prayer was recognized from the very beginning. In her prayers she delved deep into spiritual areas most would never think of, while at the same time using simple words easily understood by all yet packed with truth and wisdom.

Karen led Wednesday prayer meetings, which included collecting little notes from our church prayer box just outside the church front door which were then prayed for by the group. She also led a time of prayer during each Sunday morning worship service and closed each service with a benediction.

Karen served on the local National Day of Prayer committee which organized the event for several years. She also kept the church updated on county and statewide prayer requests and gatherings. Likewise, she participated in neighborhood prayer walks and enjoyed Christmas caroling in the neighborhood and at various retirement homes.

Karen's preaching and teaching skills were highlighted over the years as she faithfully filled the pulpit for a vacationing pastor. She also helped with Sunday School for children and teens and shared healthy snacks following church services- like vegetable trays w/dip and great salads (big ones!) Karen enjoyed church workdays as she joined others in keeping the church building and grounds neat and tidy. She also volunteered her time with Family Promise hosting homeless families for weeklong stays at the church.

For several years Karen joined the rest of the church body at GBCC hosting youths from various other churches from as far away as Beaverton, Salem and Corvallis in a weeklong summertime ministry called Love My Neighbor which provided free assistance with odd jobs at people's homes.

In more recent years Karen helped support and lead the church through its greatest challenge thus far: The recovery from the 2019 arson fire and the five-year rebuilding of the church sanctuary that ensued during the Covid 19 pandemic. Karen assisted with it all, including choosing the light fixtures, flooring, and paint colors for our new building.

Underneath that paint by the way, are passages of Scripture selected and written on the walls and floors of the church by Karen and other members of the church.

When it came to Karen's more than 10 year battle with cancer she saw it not just as her own personal battle, but one providing her the opportunity to serve others in their battles too. She shared with them the knowledge she gleaned from her study of cancer along with her personal experience in its various treatments. And of course she prayed for these people.

Karen was a blessing and an encouragement to so many. We certainly miss her.

"Well done, good and faithful servant."