

Eleanor Pearlson, 89; realtor transformed Vineyard



Eleanor Pearlson was stationed in Hawaii, where she decoded messages from warships and directed entertainment.

By [J.M. Lawrence](#)

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When Eleanor D. Pearlson moved to Martha's Vineyard from New York City in 1967, the tall outspoken woman was about as welcome in Chilmark as a hurricane.

Ms. Pearlson, a World War II Navy veteran and long-time social justice worker, had become a fledgling real estate developer with her life and business partner Julia Green Sturges.

They were outsiders in the fishing village, and their company, Tea Lane Associates, was vilified for subdividing a swath of land.

“It was a 30-year struggle,” Ms. Pearlson said in a 2006 interview with a Vineyard real estate publication. “We were two women in real estate.”

Ms. Pearlson, who helped turn Tea Lane Associates into one of the island's top real estate firms, died Dec. 22 at her home in Chilmark after a long battle with breast cancer. She was 89.

In the area of Old Farm Road and Bijah's Way during the 1970s, she and Sturges fought to build a new neighborhood with open spaces and trails. It was no Levittown — Long Island's quintessential model of post World War II suburban sprawl — and eventually Chilmark accepted them.

“She had big ideas, and she had the courage to pursue them,” said her nephew, Dan Rabinovitz of Brookline, “though if you told her she had courage, she would have shrugged her shoulders and said, ‘That’s just the way you live life.’ ”

Ms. Pearlson’s knack for real estate helped reshape Chilmark into a mecca for New York and Boston intelligentsia. Her summer guests and renters became island homebuyers.

“They brought so much intellectual capacity and philanthropic capacity to the island,” said her longtime friend Howard Pitsch of Brooklyn, N.Y., who owned a bookshop in Chilmark in the 1970s and is a retired marketing manager for Newsweek. “She would schlep them from the boat and show them the island, all the way to Gay Head.”

The daughter of a Cambridge grocer, Ms. Pearlson forged her path with chutzpah, perseverance, and exclamations of “Dammit! Dammit!” when her frustration with others boiled over, which it often did, according to friends.

“She could be as abrasive as a sawtooth,” said Pitsch. “People accepted this abrasiveness because they knew underneath it was this great spirit and generosity.”

The only person who could pacify Ms. Pearlson was Sturges, her family said.

They met in the early 1960s when Ms. Pearlson was executive secretary for the Henry Street settlement on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Sturges, whose father owned the Woodward Hotel in New York, was a board member at the settlement house and a divorced mother of two daughters.

Their support for workers during a long strike at the settlement house set the stage for their departure. Sturges ferried inside information to Ms. Pearlson, which she relayed to friends on the picket line. The striking workers lost, and Sturges was fired, she said.

They left New York together with thoughts of reinventing their lives in the Caribbean. But the Vineyard captured their dreams.

Sturges died at their home in 2003 at the age of 98.

Ms. Pearlson’s niece, Abby Rabinovitz, who works for Tea Lane Associates and lives in Chilmark, called her aunt a trailblazer for women.

“She loved Hillary Clinton,” Rabinovitz recalled. “She really had hoped to see a woman president before she died. It wasn’t that she didn’t like Barack Obama. She just wanted Hillary. She had a Hillary book on her desk and talked to everyone about it.”

Born in Cambridge, Ms. Pearlson was the second of four children of first-generation emigrants from Lithuania who ran a grocery store. The family lived above the store. She received a degree in economics in 1942 from Boston University.

After college, she joined the US Navy and became a lieutenant junior grade. “I wanted to escape the poverty of the slum area, so I went down to Causeway Street where the Navy was recruiting,” she said. “I was one of the first WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services) they took.”

Ms. Pearlson was later stationed in Hawaii at the Naval Air Station in Kaneohe, where she decoded messages from warships and was in charge of entertainment for the base, she said.

The Navy also taught her to drive, a skill she was not going to get in Cambridge in the 1940s. “Where would a poor girl get a car?” she said in the interview.

She could have made a good career in the military but craved other experiences, she said. After the war, she moved to New York City and worked in management for the Mutual Broadcasting System radio network.

In the 1950s, Ms. Pearlson was executive secretary of the Women’s Trade Union League and later became director of women’s operations for the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies in New York.

Besides her nephew Dan and her niece Abby, Ms. Pearlson leaves a brother, Paul, of Livingston, N.J.; a sister, Frieda Rabinovitz of Los Angeles; and several other nieces and nephews.

Services will be held at noon today at the Martha’s Vineyard Hebrew Center in Vineyard Haven. Burial will be in Abel’s Hill Cemetery on the Vineyard.