

Janet Theresa Niedermaier
January 25, 1955 – January 26, 2007



Jan was the first of five children born to Phil and Dot Niedermaier. As her mom said to her on her 52nd birthday, “You made us a family and showed the others the way.” Despite significant age differences between the siblings, she had an ability to relate to each of them. When she and her sister Gail learned that they had a baby brother, Mark, they went from door to door informing each of the neighbors that they were the proud sisters of a new baby brother. Jan had a special relationship with each of her siblings, and though she didn’t become much closer with Dee until their later years, it was felt by Dee to be one of the greatest gifts she has received in life.

Jan had a terrific sense of humor and an ability to reach people at their very core. She loved to play games of all kinds, from “Giant” in her childhood with her father and her younger sister, to board and computer games, Cribbage, cards and Checkers and Chess with her nieces and nephews.

She loved words and reading. Her mind was constantly in motion, even up to the very end, and she kept it sharp by reading voraciously and solving crossword puzzles and Sudoku. Jan passed her love of reading on to her nieces and nephews: Each Christmas she would purchase a book geared to that niece or nephew and read the book on cassette tape to them, then follow it up with the gift of the book itself. They loved being able to have their Aunt Jan read them a bedtime story at night.

Jan had a great love of dogs. Growing up in a household where her younger brother suffered from asthma and allergies prevented her from discovering her love for dogs early on. She certainly made up for it, however, in her adult years by falling in love with Shelties and Westies. Her babies were Fiona, Bonnie and Lizzie, until Toby came around a little later. They brought deep joy and happiness into her life.

Jan loved music. She loved to listen to music and she loved to sing. She sang with the Copper Penny Players and supported her sign language interpreter colleagues who also happened to be singers by attending concerts and listening to recordings on which they sang. As a sign language interpreter, she interpreted many plays and musicals, some at the renowned McCarter Theatre in Princeton. In 2003, she was accepted into the week long intensive workshop "Interpreting in the Theatre" sponsored by Theatre Development Fund and held at the Juilliard School in New York City. During this program, she was given the opportunity to interpret the Broadway show *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. Through the program she forged lasting friendships and applied what she learned to her work up until she was diagnosed with cancer two short years later. While in the care of hospice, not only did many of her friends and colleagues sing to her in order to bring her comfort, she also sang to them, bringing them comfort until the time she no longer had the strength to do so.

In addition to her professional orientation toward music, Jan immensely enjoyed singing with family members, including her young niece, Colleen, with whom she attended *Music Together* classes. That was the one of the highlights of Saturday mornings for Jan (and Colleen too). Over the years, Jan made up all kinds of songs for her family (*Jan's Got Two Brothers*), including one particularly silly one for her sister, Gail, as she struggled to get through nursing school. Jan's love for the theatre first showed in high school where she acted in many school productions. She truly had been bitten by "the Bug," so much so that she and a friend wrote, produced and performed the play "Cobby Bean" in a part of Lincoln Center in New York. Interestingly, through Jan's high school drama teacher's oldest daughter, she was exposed to the world of sign language for the first time and, as they say, "the rest is history".

Jan had an ability to make friends with whomever she met and would be willing to do anything for them. All they had to do was ask; if she wasn't able, she would tell them right up front. Her essence was always to take care of those around her. When walking with her somewhere, if she saw someone less fortunate, she would reach into her pocket and give what she could—saying as she walked away, "*There but for the grace of God go I.*" She had a rich spiritual life and was well versed in Scripture. She joyfully shared her knowledge and beliefs with those who were interested. She had unique strengths and a spirituality that transcended hurts and disappointments. Until she was no longer able to communicate, she put her interest in others above virtually everything else. Right down to her last few days, she was asking after others before turning to her illness. She was the consummate listener, free of judgment, wise, kind and caring. Her keen intelligence, good judgment and passion for her work and for her family and others in both her personal and professional lives made her a treasure to the numerous communities she inhabited.

Jan was a great friend of the deaf and interpreting communities in her personal and professional lives. She adored the openness and acceptance of these communities and felt completely at home within them.

She worked at the Marie Katzenbach School for the Deaf (MKSD) for 18 years as the school's Career Education Counselor. There, she counseled students regarding their careers, discussed the wishes of students with their parents, found job placements for students, and arranged for students' acceptance to colleges. She assisted students and their parents in navigating the logistics associated with admission and financial aid requests. Annually, Jan ran "College Day" where colleges who had programs for deaf students would come to MKSD. For those students who were eligible, Jan sought group home placement. During summers, Jan worked to complete an alumni survey to determine what changes MKSD needed to make in their course offerings/training to better serve its student population.

With her commitment to the students at MKSD came a desire to work more closely with issues relating to teacher qualifications, leading her eventually to work with the NJ Department of Education (NJDOE). Jan worked at the NJDOE in the Office of Standards for 6 ½ years—until she was physically unable to continue. As one of the department's liaisons to the Professional Teaching Standards Board, she assisted in developing policies for professional development and teacher quality. She loved the complexities of getting the research and synthesizing it into potential action items to be presented to the board. Among other things, Jan provided oversight for New Jersey's implementation of the highly qualified teacher initiative of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB Act), and often acted as her office's staff writer and editor. She helped to write some of New Jersey's state grants from the federal government, which brought additional federal dollars to the state to support teacher quality initiatives.

Jan was also a trainer and presenter who spoke at the state and national levels on teacher quality issues and particularly on NCLB. She believed in the key role of teachers in improving schools and student achievement and was a tireless advocate for teachers. Her presentations were always lively and packed—she was a gifted speaker who loved sharing her wisdom. While she spoke at prestigious national events, no audience was too small or too humble for Jan. She would sit on the phone happily with a single teacher for an hour to sort out questions around how to become highly qualified and to comply with national requirements. Jan relished debating and looking at issues from all angles, always being willing to sit and hash out an idea, be it about education, interpreting, music, politics, or the meaning of life.

Jan worked tirelessly to improve her American Sign Language (ASL) skills so that through her work at MKSD, the DOE, and interpreting, she could give back to the community the many gifts it had given her. To this end, she never stopped taking courses, attending seminars and conventions, and serving part-time as a community-based interpreter. In the 1990's, she passed her national level certification exams and was awarded the CI and CT (Certificates of Interpretation and Translation) from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID). Given that she was not a full-time interpreter by profession, this was a spectacular achievement.

Jan joyfully gave her time and talents to the TIGS (Teen Institute of the Garden State) program, including donating her time in order for deaf kids to have this camp experience when the TIGS' funding dried up. Jan liked kids and liked TIGS: a week in the woods, sleeping on uncomfortable bunk beds, sharing a shower with 10 other people and sharing meals with 250 screaming teens. She relished it all.

For more than 20 years, Jan was an intensely active member of the NJ Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (NJRID) and served in many capacities within the organization. For her tireless efforts, Jan received the "Distinguished Service Award." A gifted and articulate writer, full of humor and wit, Jan added much to the NJRID and its continued excellence by serving for many years as newsletter editor of the "Mediator". She was a ready source of information and communication for members both in and outside of New Jersey. Her most recent position within the NJRID was as treasurer, where her integrity was evident in her meticulous financial records. From 1995 to the time of her death, Jan also served on the NJ Deaf Awareness Week Board as a Trustee and worked enthusiastically on Deaf Fest, an annual event of the NJ Deaf Community.

After a courageous, long and painful battle against cancer, Jan passed away one day after her 52nd birthday at St. Francis Hospital in Trenton, New Jersey—having "come full circle," as Jan wittingly remarked—surrounded by family, friends, and colleagues.

Jan was the epitome of a collaborative and engaged colleague: humble, concerned, passionate, professional, rare. She was an intensely loyal friend.

Thanks to the following individuals for contributing their memories of Jan: Alan Champion, Mariann Jacobson, Mary Darragh MacLean, Martha DeBlieu, Vicki Duff, Lisette Ortiz, Gay Koenemann, Dee Kotch, Linda Lamitola, Debbie Matthews, Jan Nemeth, Cindy Sternfeld