

Rudolph M. Bell

Rudolph M. Bell of Somerset passed away on Saturday, April 9, holding his wife and daughters’ hands, surrounded by family who adored him. His sentiment in facing his own mortality, expressed many times, was immense gratitude for living such a wonderful life, and for the love of his wife, children, and grandchildren. He was 79.

Rudy is predeceased by his parents, Rudolph and Aimee Bell; and sister, Carol Bell. Surviving are his wife of 57 years, Laura; daughters and sons-in-law, Tara and Steve Giovannetti of Highland Park, New Jersey, and Alessia Bell and Mark Proctor of Westport, Connecticut; brothers and sisters-in-law, Richard and Katie Bell of Stanfordville, New York and Ronnie and Melinda Bell of Syracuse, New York; and his six beloved grandchildren, Gabriela, Luca, Katia, Carolina, Alex, and Juliette.

Born in New York City, Rudy was raised in the Briarwood section of Jamaica, Queens, in a neighborhood filled with smart, striving kids, mostly the children of immigrants. With education the clearest way up and out, the Bell children were expected to excel in school. Blessed with an exceptional innate intelligence, Rudy did excel at every subject and in every grade. But where he lacked a natural advantage, propelled by his fiercely competitive spirit, Rudy flexed his ingenuity and street smarts. In games of stickball and touch football, Rudy devised offensive attack plans against his archrival athletic neighbors that exploited any weakness and befuddled his opponents just enough to make match-ups competitive. Rudy’s fondest memories of childhood were with his siblings.

Rudy earned a scholarship to Queens College, and upon graduation, he was recruited by Metropolitan Life Insurance into the computer programming department. To pay the bills as he studied in graduate school, Rudy led the team that wrote code that powered massive early-stage mainframe computers. At MetLife, at age 21, Rudy met Laura Tomicic, fell in love, and in what he called “the best decision of my life,” Rudy and Laura married ten months later. Working overtime as a new father, Rudy completed his PhD in medieval history at the City University of New York and accepted a teaching position at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Rudy served as a History Professor at Rutgers University for 52 years before retiring as Distinguished Professor Emeritus in early 2020. He authored one book on American history but soon thereafter became enthralled with Italy and the renaissance period. Rudy went on to write five books and numerous scholarly articles on medieval and renaissance history, including the groundbreaking book on aestheticism of female saints, Holy Anorexia, which was translated into many languages, and How to Do It, which brought to life the 15th century perspective on child-reading, relationships, and living well. Rudy’s intellectual curiosity, original thinking, and creative fire burned bright until his final days, as he continued to work on new scholarship and new ideas.

At Rutgers, Rudy served as the Chair of the History Department and was considered “the heart and soul of the department.” His colleagues, mentees, and students remember Rudy as “a vital life force” and “a truly special person,” admiring his leadership, tenacity, decency, caring, and steadfast commitment to doing the right thing. Rudy also served as President of the American Association of University Professors and the Rutgers University Retired Faculty Union, where he led the fight for better pay and medical coverage for teaching assistants and continued benefits for surviving partners of retirees. A consummate fan of all team sports, Rudy was the ultimate Rutgers Football fanatic. Rain or shine, championship bound or 0-12, Rudy sat on the banks of the old Raritan, cheering his beloved Scarlet Knights.

Above all, Rudy’s source of joy was his family. Laura and Rudy shared a life of 57 years in all its glories and difficulties, lived to the absolute fullest. They traveled everywhere, always together: through the deserts of Mexico in a broken down, overheated Fiat, their girls bickering endlessly in the itchy backseat; to the halls of La Scala in Milan, their nursing infant waiting in the opera house wings; to the ruins of Sicily, with dozens of junior year abroad college students in tow.

Rudy loved the years he spent with Laura, Tara, and Alessia in Italy, mostly living in Florence, which served as the creative inspiration for his scholarship. But his heart was firmly in Laura’s hometown of Skvaranska, in Istria, Croatia, where the rugged natural beauty, the culturally complex and varied history, and above all else, the warmth and rawness of the people, allowed Rudy, with his ever active mind and boundless energy, to relax. He expressed his love for his grandchildren by bringing them to his version of heaven on Earth, surrounded by olive and fig trees, overlooking the Adriatic Sea.

Daddy and Nonno Rudy, as he was called, was for Tara and Alessia and his six grandchildren the consummate champion, teacher, and font of adventure and fun. His enduring legacy is the wisdom, unconditional love, and stunning example of growth well into age that he provided for his children and grandchildren.

A mass followed by burial will be held on Tuesday, April 19, at 10am, at St. Joseph’s Parish, 34 Yorktown Rd, Hillsborough, NJ. There will be a celebration of life luncheon right afterwards at Laura’s home.

If you would like, in lieu of flowers, donations can be made to St. Jude Children's Hospital, 501 St. Jude Place, Memphis, Tennessee 38105