

Helen O'Donnell, 1956-2017

A devoted sister remembered

Helen O'Donnell, our beloved CSO sister, passed away on December 1, 2017 at the age of 61. She was a dedicated unionist, Democratic Party activist, strong advocate for CTA members, and loyal CSO sister. She dedicated her life to promoting quality public education for all students and she worked tirelessly to improve the lives of teachers and all working people of California. She was accomplished, thoughtful, devoted and generous.

Helen was an elementary and special education teacher in Ventura County for 13 years where she was also a local leader in her union. In 2005 Helen was hired by CTA as Regional UniServ Staff in the Santa Rosa RRC. For the past 12 years, she worked with members from 18 chapters across western Sonoma County. Helen also loved CSO and was a very active leader for many years. In Sonoma County Helen was a Democratic Party leader, an enthusiastic community volunteer, and active member of the Faith Lutheran Church. Helen was also a devoted daughter, sister and aunt and loved her family very much.



Helen is missed dearly by all who had the privilege of knowing her. Here are some of the fond memories from Helen's CSO brothers and sisters:

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My first memory of Helen is a phone call telling me she was my CSO buddy. Helen loved CSO and I had a lot to learn about CTA not having grown up in CTA. I was constantly asking why. Helen was unflappable, would listen, and find an approach to move forward. I would come up with impossible and or crazy ideas and she would put them in CTA speak and help me come up with a budget as funding was important for all wild ideas, and advise whether or not to tell Diane or Shannon. The best ideas would always occur over wine. We became good friends.

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Just last week, I had an idea and reached for the phone and remembered Helen was not here to ask.

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Many of you know that Helen loved food and fine dining. She loved to pick the restaurant that we would go to when at a conference or event. What impressed me most is that, when possible, she would invite new staff to go to dinner knowing that they may not have someone to dine with. That was her way, making sure everyone had what they needed and felt included. Inevitably, dinner reservations would grow to 10-12 people. I don't remember whose idea it was but we started to call her Julie and made the reservations under the name Julie. Julie was the cruise directed on an old sitcom called the Love Boat. Julie always made sure people had fun and felt welcome. That was Helen.

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It takes a person with a great heart to be a true friend. Helen was the truest of friends. Always the first to call, send a card, give the perfect gift, make you laugh and when life gave you lemons then tell you to put your big girl pants on and get back at it.

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Helen is and always will be a part of my chosen family. Our chosen families are just as important as our blood families. Helen was family, my sister.

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We will remember Helen for a great many things, a dedicated union organizer and democrat, devoted Springsteen fan, connoisseur of Sonoma wines, avid reader, and the most reliable and dependable team member on the planet, but first and foremost a true friend.

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In life we often times find ourselves thrown together with people by chance, what a gift to those of us who interacted with Helen received. Helen's contributions, smile, camaraderie, and most importantly friendship will be missed by all. Rest In Peace, my sister.

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You cannot have known Helen without hearing her bright voice, and seeing that glint in her eye as she'd say "Hello!, why don't we just...". And then she'd provide a solution that would be simple and elegant. I'll miss everything about her.

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Many people may not know this, but Helen was president of the unrecognized CSO Jello caucus. We both share Midwest Lutheran backgrounds and would often talk about the various types of Jello that would show up at church potlucks and family gatherings. Great conversations and lots of laughs. I recommend we all have Jello shots in Helen's honor.

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When I first came to staff work I went to a many multi-day trainings and often Helen would be there too. We would always meet in the mornings to go walk before breakfast. What I remember her telling me was the recent antics and stories about her nieces and nephews and how much she loved them and got so much joy from spending time with them and her family. She always told the stories in such an animated way with many of her famous Helen laughs sprinkled in- at the time I felt like I was part of the family. I am sure the unconditional love she felt for her family was reflected back to her ten times over. She will be missed in so many ways by the many people whose lives she touched.

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The Helen Greeting could be heard across the room. Enthusiastic, sincere, rambunctious and always the Helen Laugh. It, too, was enthusiastic, infectious, joyful and mischievous, depending upon the topic and the person. Thank you, Helen, for making me feel welcome, for offering friendship and camaraderie, advice and... you.

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I only met Helen in person once during a CSO meeting, but I will never forget how struck I was by her warm and generous personality. I only wish I had gotten the opportunity to know her better.

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I first met Helen about the same time I started with CTA in 2005. I have spent much time with Helen in CSO and she was always ready to laugh out loud. The Helen I met in 2005 was the same Helen I saw in 2017 - eager to help, intensely interested, happy to see friends and colleagues, engaged and opinionated, LAUGHING and laughing some more. Helen was, as we Irish say, "good craic" [or "crack" is a term for news, gossip, fun, entertainment, and enjoyable conversation, particularly prominent in Ireland.] She would have a laugh with me for explaining "craic." She is laughing now and smiling down on us all.

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Helen was always thoughtful and deeply committed to doing the right thing over the many years I served with her off and on CSO Rep Council. She was also incredibly welcoming. There was more than one occasion at CSO or CTA multiday events after a long day away from home when I was considering just crashing in the hotel that Helen would twist my arm and invite me to join her and a group of colleagues for dinner. The group outing was always worth it and I had Helen to thank for getting me out of "hermit-mode." I will miss her.

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If you would like to honor Helen, consider donating to a charity in your community in her memory.

