

Joyce Mabel Holfeld Obituary

May 29, 1943 - January 16, 2026



It is with love and admiration that we say goodbye for now to Joyce Mabel Holfeld of Gastonia, NC who passed away on January 16, 2026, at the age of 82.

She was preceded in death by her parents, Franz Werner Holfeld and Anne Beaudrot Holfeld, and her sister Barbara Anne Holfeld. She is survived by her sister, Doris Holfeld Kellar, beloved nieces and nephews (Lisa K. Turner; Franz, Andy, Louis, and David Kellar) and 11 great nieces and nephews.

After graduating from Furman University in 1965 with a degree in Political Science and Sociology, Joyce served in the Peace Corps in Niger, conducting grassroots public health education. When asked why she cared so much about Africa and had such a drive to serve there, she replied that she believed “what happens in Africa will eventually happen to the whole world.” After receiving her Masters in Public Health and population dynamics from Tulane University in New Orleans, she lived in New York and worked for the World Health Organization.

Next, she accepted an appointment and began her long career of foreign service with the State Department of the United States, making her stateside home in Washington, DC. A seasoned Foreign Service Officer with extensive overseas and Washington experience, Joyce served in the USAID’s Policy and Program Coordination Bureau as the Agency’s Population, Health and Nutrition (PHN) Senior Advisor and also served as Secretariat for the HIV/AIDS and Infectious Diseases Senior Management team. She established PHN’s first Office of Field and Program Support, serving as its first director. Overseas, Joyce was Director of USAID/Morocco’s Office of Population, Health and Human Resources. She was posted at USAID’s regional office in Abidjan, pioneering the development of first bilateral child survival and population programs in West and Central Africa. Before USAID, she organized field programs for women’s and children’s health and voluntary contraception in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Over the course of her career, Joyce brought to USAID over 38 years of experience in International Development.

In the words of a former colleague in a farewell message at her retirement in 2005, Joyce was “the key person in the Global Health Bureau, the person who actually makes everything work” and was a person who was a “professional with grace under pressure.” Another former colleague wrote that she “always put the field first... those most

needy were her prime concern.” Another described Joyce as “always upbeat, enthusiastic and optimistic, no matter the situation.” Considered an exceptional host, she showed “southern hospitality” while holding terrific dinner parties and events several times a month; colleagues from around the world wanted to be on the guest lists for Joyce’s events. Described as “receptive, concerned and supportive, Joyce was known as an encourager for younger colleagues and a leader with “vision, wisdom and generosity.”

After retiring in 2005, she returned home to Gastonia, taking consulting jobs for a few years, working for the Bill Gates Foundation to set up vaccination programs abroad. A staunch Democrat from her teen years, Joyce worked on the local level to affect community and national politics and volunteered with Habitat for Humanity during retirement. She believed in the power of working for positive change in the world and lived her life following that principle. She enjoyed working on family genealogy and traveling to see people and places from family history, such as the Hohlfelds of Germany.

Niger, Taiwan, Morocco, Ivory Coast, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Tunisia were places Joyce lived and served, spending nearly 2 decades living in Africa. As children, her beloved nieces and nephews and, later, her great nieces and nephews were inspired to travel, seek adventure, and help others in their vocations or advocations. Joyce encouraged her loved ones to find their passion.

One of Joyce’s memorable goals was to swim in every ocean and sea on the globe, a goal that she attained. Other goals, written down and kept since her teen years, included learning French fluently, visiting the Egyptian pyramids, riding an elephant, traveling through the Sahara on a camel, being invited to the White House, learning to sail, and studying African art, were mostly attained. A fearless and determined adventurer with a love of people all over the world, Joyce found joy in collecting friends and making family wherever she served. A visionary ground-breaker who crashed through many glass ceilings, Joyce left her mark on the world.

The family will receive friends from 1:00 pm until 2:00 pm, Friday, January 23, 2026, at McLean Funeral Directors of Gastonia. A funeral service will follow at 2:00 pm in Founders Chapel of McLean Funeral Directors with Reverend Jeff Spargo officiating. Interment will follow in Gaston Memorial Park.

Because Joyce was a lover of her pets, Lucy the cat in particular, anyone desiring to make a contribution in Joyce’s memory may donate to the Animal League of Gaston County, 425 West Franklin Blvd., Gastonia, NC 28052. Phone number 704-868-4673.

To send flowers to the family of Joyce Mabel Holfeld, please [visit our floral store.](#)

