

Donna Marie Ayerst obituary



Donna Marie Ayerst, 78, the wife of retired USAID FSO David Hess, passed away on June 2, 2026, in Wallingford, Conn. Ms. Ayerst was born on October 28, 1947, in Ontario, Canada.

She migrated with her family to Orange County, California, when she was 8 years old and graduated from Orange High School, where she was editor of the school newspaper and a cheerleader. She attended Chapman College.

In a move that changed her life forever, Ms. Ayerst sailed and studied around the world on the Chapman-based program then called World Campus Afloat. After 1966, it was known as Semester at Sea. She was a student on the ship in the fall of 1966 and sailed as the ship photographer in the fall of 1969.

Once Ms. Ayerst saw the greater world in all the countries where the ship docked, her foreign adventures began, and she never looked back. She launched a professional photography career. A unique opportunity came when she successfully interviewed with Mick Jagger and became baby Jade Jagger's nanny. Again, she traveled the world, this time with the world's greatest rock star.

In 1975 Ms. Ayerst married Lindsay Elmendorf. Their son Stirling was born in 1976 and son Byron in 1978. From 1978 to 1980, the family lived in Honduras, where Mr. Elmendorf joined USAID's Foreign Service and Ms. Ayerst was a professional photographer working mostly for the Honduran government. The family moved on to Mr. Elmendorf's next post, Ecuador (1986–1991), where Ms. Ayerst began her career as a community liaison office coordinator (CLO) for U.S. Embassy Quito. A most energetic and successful CLO, Ms. Ayerst actively supported morale at post and all other social and community issues. The family then moved to India (1994–1997), where Ms. Ayerst served as the CLO for a much larger embassy.

The Elmendorfs' marriage ended in 1997. Ms. Ayerst met USAID FSO David Hess in India, and they moved together to Rwanda (1997–1999), where she again served as an excellent CLO. Next was Mozambique (1999–2003), where she served once more as CLO. The couple married in 2002 in South Africa and returned to Washington, D.C., where Ms. Ayerst finished her State Department career in the Family Liaison Office (2003–2008). She wrote the State Department manual on the CLO program and traveled the world training CLOs.

After retiring in 2008, Ms. Ayerst joined the American Foreign Service Association staff as a photographer and associate editor with The Foreign Service Journal (2011–2014). Her final CLO gig was for the British High Commission in Tanzania from 2015 to 2017.

Ms. Ayerst was predeceased by her first husband, Lindsay Elmendorf, in 2017. She is survived by her husband, David Hess; sons Stirling (and spouse, Kumiko) Elmendorf and Byron Elmendorf (and spouse, Miranda Capriotti); stepdaughter Olivia (and spouse, Lee) Iovino; stepson Garth (and spouse, Amanda) Hess; and grandchildren Gabriel Hess, Gregory Hess, Calvin Elmendorf, Lainey Iovino, and Bowie Elmendorf. There will be a future memorial service for her.

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