Nancy Lee Estes obituary



Nancy Lee Estes passed away peacefully on August 18, 2026, in Tucson, Arizona, following a long battle with cancer. She is survived by her brother, Richard (Chip) Estes of Ocala, Florida, cousins in Maine and elsewhere, and many members of her USAID 'family.' Memorial arrangements and a memory book were entrusted to Evergreen Mortuary, 3015 N. Oracle, Tucson, AZ. (Evergreenmortuary-cemetery.com)

Nancy was born on June 5, 1948. A native Arizonan, she grew up in the Phoenix area. Nancy's desert roots and education reflected her two enduring passions — music and Africa. After graduating from UC Berkeley (music), she moved to the Boston area where she worked at Harvard University, attending concerts at Symphony Hall (choosing seats that allowed a view of the pianists' hands!) and art exhibitions. She then moved to Washington, DC, where she began her career in humanitarian assistance and Africa by working for IFPRI and completing a Masters Degree in African Studies at The John Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (1984-1986).

In the early 1990s, Nancy's interests led her to a career at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) where she worked on some of the world's most demanding humanitarian challenges. Nancy served as a Food for Peace Officer in Rwanda, Mali, REDSO/West Africa (USAID's regional office in Cote d'Ivoire), and REDSO/East Africa (USAID's regional office in Kenya) - all with USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance. She subsequently served in Ethiopia as Deputy Director, in Guinea as Mission Director for Guinea and Sierra Leone, and finally in Pakistan as a Deputy Director. Her tour in Pakistan was curtailed for health reasons, and she was assigned to the Bureau for Democracy and Humanitarian Response until her retirement. Nancy continued to work with USAID for a number of years as a consultant, serving for nearly a year at USUN/Rome to support the US relationship with the World Food Program and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization. She undertook several consultancies to Sudan and the Horn of Africa region during times of drought and civil strife, and to Bangladesh to support the Rohinga refugees.

Nancy is remembered by hundreds of people in many countries with whom she lived and worked; they cite with great fondness her warmth, adventurous spirit, love of life, and commitment to the world's most disadvantaged peoples. She is remembered as a good and generous friend, an accomplished professional, a kind soul, a woman with a constant smile and twinkle in her eye.

“She had a deep connection to her experiences in Africa. We bonded over our mutual love for the continent and admiration for its people. I loved her passion for cats and dogs, African art, beautiful music, sunsets and travel.” “I will always remember Nancy for her mentorship, and very kind hospitality in Nairobi. I don't remember ever staying at a hotel during TDYs there – that Nancy would open her home to me was just a given. And I'll never forget racing down a road known for kidnapping, with Nancy like a Formula 1 driver!” “Dear Nancy, I will miss your kind and bright spirit in this world… We had such fun in Addis Ababa, running around over the weekend to various art galleries and museums. You encouraged me to buy a lovely Ethiopian painting that I still have hanging in our living room; when I look at it I think of you.” “Nancy’s indomitable spirit continued until just before she passed and she continued to travel and remained interested in hearing about the lives of her friends and their families. Her greatest pleasure while in Tucson was watching the sunset from the hills near her house with a small group of friends and their dogs which she did almost every evening. And, she willed her African art collection to a former USAID colleague who feels very honored by the gesture.” “Nancy was such a fun and adventurous person! She made the world a better place … her love and enthusiasm were contagious. I miss and will always remember her.” “She was an artist at heart, an accomplished musician, art collector, and supporter of African artists. She immersed herself in the cultures of the countries in which she served. She supported female staff to achieve their goals. She believed strongly in the work of USAID, whether that was HIV/AIDS, emergency relief, or nutrition programs.” “She brightened lives around the globe through her work, her exceptional ability to learn the languages and cultures of others, and her determination to leave the world a better and friendlier place.”

We will each have lived a good life to be remembered so fondly.