

# Provincetown Arts 'hero' Mailer is missed

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Norris and Norman Mailer at their Provincetown home in 2001. Norris Mailer helped keep the Provincetown Repertory Theatre afloat during the early 2000s in her role as artistic director.

**Cape Cod Times file**

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PROVINCETOWN - Norris Church Mailer, the wife of renowned American author Norman Mailer, left her mark in Provincetown's theater, art and literature scene.

She died of gastrointestinal cancer at the age of 61 Sunday in Brooklyn Heights with sons Matthew Mailer and John Buffalo Mailer nearby, said family friend J. Michael Lennon, who has a home in Provincetown and is Norman Mailer's biographer.

The family will hold a spring memorial service in Provincetown and also bury some of her ashes in the Provincetown town cemetery where Norman Mailer, who died in 2007, is buried, Lennon said.

Residents and friends said Monday they will remember her grace, emotional strength and self-effacement — and her beauty.

"It's quite an honor to have known her," said Nancyann Meads of Provincetown, who was a friend and served on the board of the Provincetown Repertory Theatre with her. "She was a gracious lady and a lovely woman, and she was dedicated to the theater and the arts, and a fabulous artist. It was a pleasure being her friend."

Norris Mailer, a former Arkansas high school art teacher, lived part time in the East End of Provincetown during her 27-year marriage to Norman. Since 2008, the family home at 627 Commercial St. has housed The Norman Mailer Center and The Norman Mailer Writers Colony, which she co-founded. This summer she read from her

memoir, "A Ticket to the Circus," at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, where she served on the advisory board, and the Provincetown Theater, where she chaired the advisory board.

"It was very moving, her stories about herself, her life here and her life with Norman," said former neighbor Marcene Marcoux of Provincetown.

Both the Provincetown Theater and the Fine Arts Work Center greatly value her contributions, spokespersons said Monday.

In the early 2000s, she took on the unpaid role of artistic director at Provincetown Repertory Theatre, prior to the troupe's merger with another local theater company. During that period she headed up two "packed house" fundraising theatrical productions in Provincetown, one with writer George Plimpton and the other with writer Gore Vidal, said Brian O'Malley, a physician and Provincetown Theater Foundation board president.

"She's such a hero for us," said O'Malley on Monday. "When the Rep was threatened with death, Norris kept us going. Her energy and inspiration made us believe in ourselves. We felt like we could do it. We didn't want to let her down."

She also helped raise the profile in New York of the Fine Arts Work Center. She raised money and, in the 1980s, painted in studios that were then so primitive there were birds' nests in the corners, said Work Center executive director Margaret Murphy Monday.

"We'll miss her," said Murphy.

Others on Monday remembered casual moments with her.

East End neighbor and family friend Chris Busa gave Norris tennis lessons and teased her about her pale Southern skin, which she called "fish-belly white." As founder of Provincetown Arts Magazine, Busa published reviews of her three books, the memoir being her third. He also watched her as she bonded with her husband's children. "There was a steadiness to her," Busa said. "She was like a rudder to keep his sailboat on course."

Lennon also recalled several-times-a-week Texas Hold 'em poker games at the East End house, where Norris cooked fried chicken and pecan pies with nuts flown in from Arkansas.

Her literary agent, John Taylor "Ike" Williams, who owns a house in Wellfleet, worked with her on all three books and recalled on Monday his first impression of her a few decades back.

At the time, Williams said, he was an attorney working with Norman Mailer on his Pulitzer Prize-winning book "The Executioner's Song," and happened to walk out into the waiting room where "this unbelievable-looking woman" was standing. He asked Mailer who that was, and Mailer replied, "I think we're going to get married."

"Lucky you," Williams said he responded. "I can say, as a male, it was awe inspiring."