

Epilogue | Joann Torretta Guagliardo

Epilogue: TV pioneer Joann Torretta did it all, and made others believe they could, too

By Taylor Telford, Times Staff Writer

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TAMPA — Growing up, Paul Guyardo remembers, his family ate dinner late — around 8 p.m. His mother, Joann Torretta Guagliardo, worked long days as a fashion director in big department stores. But she still made dinner each night.

"She wasn't the best cook," said son Paul Guyardo, 55. "But she always made time for us."

In a time of rigid gender roles, his mother shunned expectations. Torretta — she always used her professional name — funneled her drive and passion into careers as a writer for a radio show, television host, fashion director and entrepreneur.

She was a dedicated wife and mother who brought her children into her working world and showed them how to strive. Her daughter, Gayle Guyardo, is an anchor on WFLA-Ch. 8, the same station where her mother worked. Both Paul and Gayle use Guyardo, a shortened version of their surname, professionally.

"Everything that young women of today enjoy, my mom was doing it in a time and area when that just was unheard of," the son said. "She knew women didn't have to define themselves just by being mothers."

Torretta died July 8 from myelodysplastic syndrome, a bone marrow failure disorder. She was 85.

She was born in Tampa and graduated from Academy of the Holy Names high school. She studied English and speech at Northwestern University. She graduated in 1953 and, after a stint writing for a fitness radio show in New Orleans, returned to Tampa. She eventually became the host of her own television show, *Fashions for You* on Channel 8.

The son said his father, Joseph Guagliardo, fell in love with Torretta while watching her on-screen. They married in 1959, and her husband was her biggest fan.

Paul was their first child. Then Torretta started working as a fashion director for Sears and Montgomery Ward in Tampa. There, she organized massive fashion shows and ran the store's Wendy Ward Charm School, which taught fashion and etiquette to girls in the 1960s and '70s.

Both of her kids, Paul and Gayle, were thrown into the fashion world by their mother. They walked the runway in dozens of shows. When her son outgrew that, he started producing the shows, handling the lighting and selecting the perfect songs for each clothing selection. Gayle Guyardo recalls how awkward and shy she was as a little girl, and how her mother pushed her to overcome her nerves.

Torretta's desire to imbue others with confidence and poise led her to open First Impressions in 1983, the first modeling and image school for men and women in Tampa.

Olivia Fiss was one of the thousands of students to take classes at First Impressions under Torretta, and later became her assistant. She started classes as a fourth grader to help improve her self-confidence.

Years later, the 18-year-old is now a successful beauty pageant competitor and is competing in this year's Miss Florida pageant.

"I owe a lot to Joann for helping me break out of my shell," Fiss said.



Courtesy of Paul Guyardo

Joann Torretta Guagliardo died July 8 from myelodysplastic syndrome at the age of 85.

Torretta had grit. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1983, she got involved with the American Cancer Society and created the "Look Good, Feel Better" program, which teaches beauty tips to those suffering from cancer.

Torretta was an immaculate dresser, whether attending a major social event or just getting lunch with a friend. On Saturday nights, she and her husband would get dressed up and go out dancing. Joseph Guagliardo took classes so that he could keep up with her. Together they mastered everything from the waltz to the cha-cha.

But Torretta could be goofy, too. She loved dressing up for Halloween. She was usually a witch, complete with a stringy-haired wig and a tilting, pointy hat. She'd drop the needle on a record of creepy sounds before she answered the door for trick-or-treaters, handing out candy to the tune of shrieks and cackles.

She had a soft spot for dogs and infamously let her pups off the leash in her neighborhood. When the dogs wreaked havoc on the neighbors' yards, she'd apologize with sincerity, but once their backs were turned, she couldn't suppress her laughter.

When she wasn't working, Torretta's favorite thing to do was go to the beach. When her kids were small, they'd spend hours there together, getting pounded by waves while riding Styrofoam boogie boards and hunting for shells in the sand.

She took her last breath in her beach condo at Longboat Key, with her children holding her hands.

.Biography

Joann Torretta Guagliardo

Born: December 29, 1931

Died: July 8, 2017

Survivors: Joann Torretta Guagliardo is survived by her son, Paul Guyardo, his wife, Victoria, and their children, Paul and Julia; and her daughter, Gayle Guyardo, her husband, Mark, and their children, Katie, Lindsay, Ali and Ella.

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