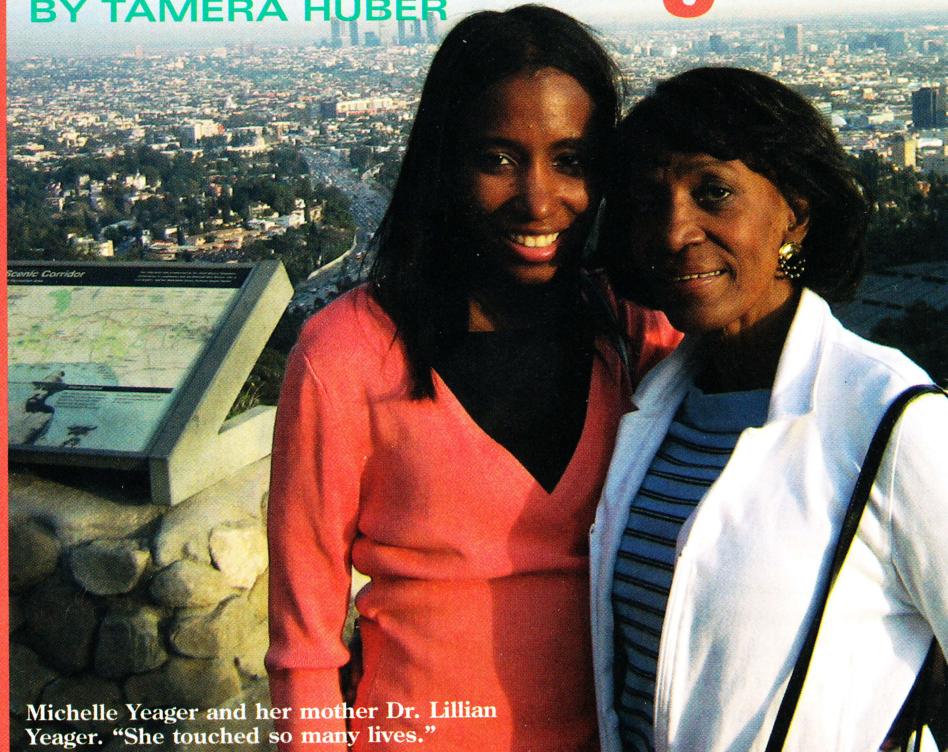


# A Quiet Angel

BY TAMERA HUBER



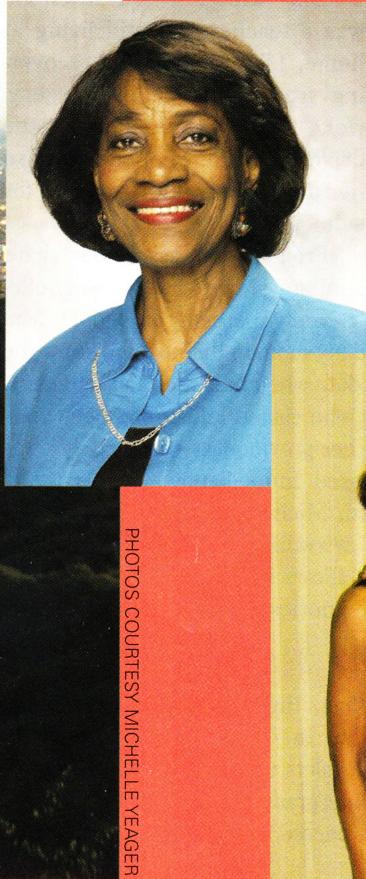
Michelle Yeager and her mother Dr. Lillian Yeager. "She touched so many lives."

WHETHER ATTENDING BOARD MEETINGS, volunteering at health fairs, dancing the Electric Slide or teaching the next generation of nurses, Dr. Lillian Yeager embraced life — for as long as possible. She embodied the word charity, and gave her time, her talents and her compassion to others while she struggled to survive Stage IV ovarian cancer, the most advanced phase of the disease. On May 23, 2006, Lillian died at the age of 62, five years to the day after she received the diagnosis.

As dean of nursing at Indiana University Southeast in New Albany, Lillian continued working until two weeks before her death. During the five years after her diagnosis, her only respite from chemotherapy lasted six months. Lillian never experienced a remission. "She knew she wouldn't beat

it, but the chemo extended her life," daughter Michelle Yeager says. Michelle can count the number of times on one hand that her mother seemed upset about her prognosis. "People admired her strength and positive outlook even though she was going through a great deal," Michelle says.

The week after the cancer diagnosis, Lillian joined Ovarian Awareness of Kentucky (O.A.K.), a gynecological cancer support and education organization. Lillian always raised her hand to help at health fairs and fundraising events, and visited newly diagnosed cancer patients, according to O.A.K. co-founder Jill Doimer. "She always put everybody before herself," Jill says. She grabbed women, almost literally, from her oncologist's waiting room and brought them to support meetings.



PHOTOS COURTESY MICHELLE YEAGER

Michelle and Lillian Yeager have a night of fun and laughs at an annual themed party.



*"Nothing someone does is small. All things need to be recognized and noticed."*

— daughter Michelle Yeager says, echoing the quiet teachings of her mother, Dr. Lillian Yeager.

But the cancer failed in its mission to slow her down. Instead of giving up, Lillian became active in every aspect of her life and inspired others to do the same. Although she tired more easily, less than a month

A commitment to community involvement led Lillian to serve on the boards of O.A.K., the Home of the Innocents, Southern Indiana Rehab Hospital, KYANNA (the Black Nurses Association of Louisville) and Frazier Rehab, among others. She was elected to the National Episcopal Church's executive council, on which she served for six years, and was active in her own St. Matthews parish.

Jacquelyn Reid worked with Lillian Yeager at IUS during the five years Lillian lived with ovarian cancer. "Lillian had a saying, 'On good days, I'm my usual self, and on bad days — I'm my usual self.' She was one very strong woman," Jacquelyn, IUS nursing instructor and nurse midwife, says. During Lillian's first chemotherapy,

friends gathered around her, watched a Bill Cosby video, and ate fruit popsicles as they laughed and enjoyed each other's company.

The laughter amplified through the halls and a nurse closed Lillian's door because the laughter was bothering the sick people. She says, "It was such a different atmosphere in her room." As she and Lillian's other friends walked down the hall, they noticed other patients receiving chemo. "Someone would be with them, reading a book, not interacting, not sharing the bond." Jacquelyn is a big believer in staying positive — the more positive mindset, the better the treatment outcome. Lillian exemplified a positive attitude and the strength of character Jacquelyn admired. "She is just a courageous woman. I talk about her in the present tense because she's still with me," she says.

Leah Phillips-Black remembers Lillian Yeager as a mentor who she dearly misses. Leah, a nurse practitioner with NeuroCare of Southern Indiana, recalls her first IV on a patient at Floyd Memorial. Lillian stood behind her stoically as the patient asked how many IVs Leah had performed. She said, "I can't count how many I've done." Lillian giggled and the patient immediately relaxed. So did Leah. "By the grace of God, I got the IV in," she says. Once she finished the procedure, Leah admitted that this was the first IV on anyone other than a nursing student. Lillian hugged her and they shared a good laugh.

One of the last times Leah saw her mentor was on May 10, thirteen days before Lillian died. Although frail and 20 pounds lighter, Lillian attended a ceremony celebrating Leah's IUS Alumni Award of Excellence, an award for which Lillian nominated her. When she saw Lillian, Leah ditched her prepared speech. "I threw it out the window." Instead, she told the audience how much Lillian meant to her over the years and how much she loved her. "I got to thank her, one last time."

before she died, Lillian traveled from one state to another attending meetings, graduation ceremonies and family events. Michelle says, "She did every single thing she wanted to do. No regrets."

Michelle, a UniServ director (a teacher representative and advocate) for the Jefferson County Teachers Association and her parents' only child, learned respect and support for people by observing the way her mother treated others. "Nothing someone does is small. All things need to be recognized and noticed," she says, echoing her mother's quiet teachings.

Lillian was a nurturer who drew upon an inner strength, even during chemotherapy, to reach out to others. Michelle relates the story of her mom visiting a young mother dying of cancer. On the way to the hospital room, Lillian noticed a woman crying by the elevator. She comforted the stranger and asked which patient she was visiting. The two women discovered they planned to see the same person, and they became fast friends. "She would have

**O.A.K., Ovarian Awareness of Kentucky, provides resources in the form of support and education for women with ovarian and gynecologic cancer, and their family and friends. Jill Doimer, whose mother contracted ovarian cancer, and Judy Morris, who died of ovarian cancer in 2003, co-founded the 501 c 3 non-profit organization in 2001. At the time of Judy's diagnosis, Louisville had no ovarian cancer support groups.**

**O.A.K.**  
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done anything for my mom," Michelle says.

One winter when Michelle was a teacher and still living at home, Lillian, who was recovering from lymph node surgery, woke up early. She shoveled the driveway while Michelle slept so her daughter wouldn't be late for school.

Friends and associates share similar stories with Michelle.

"Seventy percent of people who visited my mom in the hospital knew the exact date when they met her," she says. Many who visited Lillian had been visited by her previously — when they were diagnosed. Immediately after her mother died, Michelle Yeager set up a Web blog, [www.lillianyeager.blogspot.com](http://www.lillianyeager.blogspot.com), which allows friends to post comments and memories about her mom.

## Seeing No Color

Lillian, the oldest of five children, grew up in Georgia during the Civil Rights Era and dispensed salt tablets to marchers in Selma, Ala. Although she received her undergraduate nursing degree from Tuskegee University, she was barred from attending a master's

program in Alabama. Instead, she moved to the Detroit area, earned a master's degree in medical-surgical nursing education from Wayne State University, then graduated with a doctorate in educational leadership from Spalding University. "She wanted to be as much as she could be with what she had," Michelle says.

Both of Michelle's parents worked on college campuses, and both have scholarships dedicated to their memories: the Lillian Yeager Nursing Leadership Award at IUS and the T. Stephen Yeager Scholarship at Jefferson Community College (JCC). Michelle's father, who died when Michelle was in high school, wrote grants for JCC and began a recognition ceremony for African American students, a program which celebrated its 20th anniversary this year. Her earliest memory of her parents? Tagging along during meetings. "I saw how much they were involved and how important they were in the community."

At her mother's 60th birthday party, Michelle met people from diverse backgrounds — black, white, old, young. "My mother saw no color." Everywhere she goes, she hears Lillian's praises. No surprise to Michelle. Lillian attended every one of her daughter's ball games, gymnastics meets, and performances.

## A Quiet Angel

To her daughter and to those whose lives she touched, Lillian is "a silent angel." She may not have changed the world, but she

*"She wanted to be as much as she could be with what she had."*

— Michelle Yeager speaking of her mother, Dr. Lillian Yeager.

changed lives — one at a time. Michelle says, "Each person she touched made a difference." And she touched so many lives.

Michelle remembers a night when her mother chaperoned a dance at her high school. Nobody wanted to be the first on the dance floor. The DJ played the Electric Slide and her mother started dancing by herself. Michelle cringed with embarrassment until her friends joined her mother. From then on, whenever that song played, Michelle and her mom danced together.

Receiving Sunday communion at St. Matthews Episcopal Church was another way Michelle and her mother shared the joy of being together. "I had looked forward to being with her on May 21." They planned to celebrate her mother's five-year cancer survival, Michelle's 30th birthday, and communion with each other. "Unfortunately, that day didn't come."

Lillian entered the hospital, prepared to die. "I went to church and realized that there would be no more Sundays like that...however, there was one more." The funeral service on May 31 gave Michelle another opportunity to take communion next to her mother; the casket sat at the communion rail. Michelle says, "I was comforted by that." And that very night Michelle and her friends went to Jerry Green's, her mother's favorite club — and danced the Electric Slide.