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Life was

a journey for world traveler

By Tracee M. Herbaugh
For the star-Ledger

In the sunroom of his home in Scotch Plains, retired U.S. Army Reserve Lt. Colonel Bernardo Canete flipped through a coffee-table book titled "100 Wonders of the World," stopping at the table of contents where check marks appear next to the destinations he and his wife have visited.

Among them: Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the Hagia Sophia in Turkey, Petra in Jordan and the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

Three years ago, facing a terminal illness, Teresita Canete quit her job, and she and her husband embarked on a quest to visit as many of the world's great landmarks as they could. Before she died last month, she managed to see more than a dozen on four continents.

"Her goal was to hit all these places," said Canete.

Teresita Canete died on Nov. 24 at age 63, after a seven-year battle with endometrial cancer.

A native of the Philippines, Teresita had nurtured a lifelong love of travel. But knowing her time to see the world was limited, she retired after almost 30 years as a nurse with the Veterans Administration in 2006 and began chemotherapy treatments.

Soon after she retired, Teresita, Bernardo and their two children went to Machu Picchu, an ancient Inca city nestled in the mountains of Peru.

As the chemotherapy progressed, her hair fell out, but that didn't stop her from catching a flight to exotic destinations with her husband in between treatments. Teresita was influenced by the spirit of the author Jack Kerouac and said life without travel is only half-living.

"She just wanted to travel and do all of the things she always wanted to do," her son, Rodney, said.

One of six children, Teresita was born on June 12, 1946, in Cebu, Philippines.

An avid reader, she cultivated her passion for learning and travel through literature.

"Even though she came from a wealthier family in the Philippines, it's still is a Third World country, and people there don't have a lot of money," her son said. "Growing up, her travel was in books only."

She obtained her nursing degree in 1968 and came to New York City three years later on an exchange program for health care professionals. The same year, her husband immigrated from Cebu in the Philippines.

They married in 1973 and later had two children, Rodney and Rachael. She earned a master's degree in nursing from NYU and later joined the Army Reserves, where she served 21 years before retiring in 2005 with the rank of major.

Every year, she led her family on a trip. They visited the Caribbean and Europe and drove across the country in a van for two weeks.

But in the last three years of her life, the trips she and her husband took became more frequent. Because of personal and cultural reasons, Teresita was private about her illness. Friends and co-workers she knew for decades didn't know she had cancer. But close friends had their suspicions she wasn't well.

"I can't think for her, but maybe she was thinking she was running out of time and she wanted to see as many places as she could," said Carmen Lou, a family friend who knew Teresita for more than 40 years. "You know it's the kind of thing where time is your enemy."

Her last trip was a cruise from New York to Nova Scotia over the summer. She had plans for a January trip to the Philippines and Malaysia.

But, on Nov. 12 she checked into the hospital for complications of her illness, and almost two weeks later, she died.

At the time of her death, she had checked off 46 sites in the coffee-table book, a Christmas gift from her son.

For now, her husband needs time before he considers continuing her quest to see all 100 of the wonders on the list.

"At this point in time, it hurts," he said. "I would like to go, but I don't think I can without her."

Tracee M. Herbaugh is a reporter for the New Jersey Local News Service. She may be reached at therbaugh@njlns.com or (908) 243-6214.

PHOTO CAPTION: un1203spobitLNS Scotch Plains resident Teresita Canete spent her last three years fulfilling her dream of world travel. She's seen here at Petra, an archaeological site in Jordan. Diagnosed with cancer in 2002, the disease progressed and she died on Nov. 24. Canete had a coffee table book on 100 world wonders and would check off a number every year until the list was almost entirely crossed off at the time of her death. No Photo Credit Sent DIRECT TO SELECTS Wednesday, December 02, 2009 15:33:54 1175 1791 un1203spobitLNS Scotch Plains resident Teresita Canete spent her last three years fulfilling her dream of world travel. She's seen here at the Egyptian pyramids. Diagnosed with cancer in 2002, the disease progressed and she died on Nov. 24. Canete had a coffee table book on 100 world wonders and would check off a number every year until the list was almost entirely crossed off at the time of her death. No Photo Credit Sent DIRECT TO SELECTS Wednesday, December 02, 2009 15:34:00 1787 1176 Teresita Canete, seen during a visit to the pyramids in Egypt, spent the last three years of her life fulfilling her dream of world travel. She died on Nov. 24.