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Master Pianist Has Humanities Teacher

As a college humanities professor in San Diego, Virginia Mracek lived and breathed the material she taught.

A master pianist with an operatic voice, she was fluent in French, German, Italian and Latin and also spoke Russian and Japanese. Her courses on Western civilization were informed by her years of study in Europe as well as her seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of the arts.

"She was really a Renaissance woman," said longtime friend Lisa Matt, a fellow professor.

Mrs. Mracek died Jan. 18 at Nazareth House in San Diego. The cause of death was complications from gallbladder cancer, said her son, Ed Mracek. She was 78.

She started teaching Italian at San Diego State College in 1965. She later taught English as a Second Language as well as humanities and Western civilization courses for the San Diego Community College District and Grossmont College.

Mrs. Mracek taught inmates in the Navy brig at the 32nd Street Naval Station as part of a little-known program organized by the San Diego Community College Foundation in the late 1980s.

Guards escorted her students from their cells to a windowless classroom where they spent three hours a day studying Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo and Botticelli. Many of the inmates had never been exposed to the humanities and had a real hunger and desire to learn, said Vincent Benfante, a military education coordinator who worked with Mrs. Mracek.

"Her personality and wide-ranging love of the arts made her a really accessible, motivating and inspiring teacher," Benfante said. "She really was bringing a light into a really dark place."

Most of the inmates at the brig were about to be kicked out of the military with a dishonorable discharge. Mrs. Mracek's courses gave them the opportunity to at least leave with some college credit and a renewed sense of hope, Benfante said.

"She really made a difference in a lot of people's lives," said Matt, who taught in the brig program with Mrs. Mracek.

Mrs. Mracek was particularly passionate about opera. Her dream was to be Maria Callas, one of the most famous opera singers of the 20th century, said her son. Mrs. Mracek and her husband were patrons of the San Diego Opera as well as the San Diego Symphony, the San Diego Museum of Art, the La Jolla Chamber Music Society and the San Diego Zoo.

"Virginia was an extraordinary woman — a great opera singer and a true opera lover," said Lisa Kalal, a San Diego Opera development director.

Virginia Ann Chambers was born Dec. 8, 1934, to George and Dora Chambers in London, Ontario. In 1952 she graduated from Ursuline College, a Catholic secondary school in Chatham,

Ontario. She earned a bachelor's degree from Brescia University College in London, Ontario, in 1956.

She studied music in Vienna and Florence, Italy, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1963 she earned a Master of Music in Piano degree from Indiana University and married Dr. Jaroslav J.S. Mracek. In 1965, she earned a master's degree in Italian.

What was then San Diego State College hired Dr. and Mrs. Mracek as faculty in 1965. Dr. Mracek died in 1999.

In the mid-1990s, Mrs. Mracek became an American citizen. Raised in the Anglican Church, she converted to Catholicism in 2004 and became a parishioner at Mission San Diego de Alcala.

A viewing is scheduled for Jan. 31 at 5:30 p.m. at Greenwood Memorial Park. A funeral Mass will be held at 11:30 a.m. Feb. 1 at Mission San Diego de Alcala.

Mrs. Mracek is survived by her sons, Edward and Christopher, of San Diego. In lieu of flowers, her family suggests donations to Mission San Diego de Alcala, the San Diego Opera, or the Campanile.