**Obituary for Mary Classen Born, MSW, ACSW**

February 17, 1956 – May 27, 2016

Mary Classen Born, a social worker and family therapist, died in Niles, Illinois at Generations at Regency nursing center on May 27, 2016. She was sixty years old. After her diagnosis with Huntington’s disease in 1996 at the age of forty, and retirement in 2000, she valiantly continued to live an active life that included travel, food, art, and the exploration of her own spiritual journey. Since 2009 she lived at Regency under full-time nursing supervision.

She is predeceased by her parents, George and Lydia (Wiens) Classen; her stepmother, Theresa Classen; her father’s twelve siblings; two cousins, Jan and Cindy Wiens; Uncle Pete and Aunt Lenora Wiens; Aunt Martha Groening; Aunt Hilda Friesen; Aunt Marge Wiens. She is survived and mourned by her daughter Elizabeth Born, ex-husband Daniel Born (both of Chicago), siblings Vern Classen (Littleton, Colorado), Naomi Classen Krause (Martinez, California), and Phil Classen (Valley Center, Kansas). She is also survived by her Uncle Waldo and Aunt Alvina Wiens (Hutchinson, Kansas), Uncle Rolly Wiens (Meade, Kansas), Uncle Mick Friesen (Meade, Kansas), her cousin Gwen Wiens Blum (Lawrence, Kansas), as well as more cousins, nephews, nieces, and many friends.

Mary Ellen Classen was born in Huron, South Dakota on February 17, 1956. Raised in the Mennonite tradition, she claimed conversion in her early years at the Ebenfeld Mennonite Brethren Church in Kansas, where she was also baptized. She was an active member of the Manhattan Mennonite Fellowship in New York City, serving as part of its leadership team in the mid-1980s, and later joined Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, New York. She was an active member of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Marietta from 1993 until 2001.

She attended Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kansas, where she met Daniel Born, whom she married in 1977. In 1978 she graduated with her bachelor’s degree in social work. That year she also received the Social Sciences Divisional Award at Tabor and was listed in Who’s Who in American Colleges and Universities. In 1980 she received her master’s in social work from the University of Kansas, with a clinical concentration in community mental health, before taking her first job with Illinois Masonic Hospital in Chicago as part of the hospital’s stroke rehabilitation unit.

She would do further postgraduate study at Grant Hospital in Chicago, Rutgers University in New Jersey, and the New School for Social Research in New York City. In New Jersey, she worked as a family therapist at the Dumont Community Center for Mental Health; as director of residential services for the Pequannock Valley Mental Health Center; and as a private practice family therapist in Wayne and West Caldwell. Later, in Marietta, Ohio, she would also have a private practice.

During her career she worked with individuals suffering from addictions and mental illness; served as a clinical and administrative supervisor for chronically hospitalized adults; and consulted with community boarding homes for the mentally disabled. Her last full-time position was as a family therapist with St. Joseph’s Hospital, Center for Behavioral Medicine, in Parkersburg, West Virginia.

She was active in the fight against Huntington’s disease before her own symptoms appeared. From 1987 to 1991 she was a member of the board of the New Jersey chapter of the Huntington’s Disease Society of America, serving with Thomas Kean, the governor of New Jersey, and Dr. Samuel Baily, the first president of the national HDSA organization. She was active in HDSA support group activities after her diagnosis, and also spoke at the Illinois state conference about her struggle with the illness. She did not lose hope. She had great confidence in the scientific research to find a cure, and enjoyed an especially close relationship with her neurologist, Dr. Kathleen Shannon, at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago.

Mary had a radiant smile and knew how to switch on the charm. She liked to work out, and while she was raised in a tradition that emphasized the inner light and spiritual formation, she appreciated making a fine appearance. Her friends recall her verbal facility, wit, and laughter. She was as comfortable talking about her evolving theology as she was sharing her quest for the perfect bread pudding in New Jersey diners. She loved nice restaurants in big cities. She liked the movies, and could bake an excellent apple pie. She was fond of New York, Paris, and Chicago. She thrilled to see her daughter graduate from the Art Institute of Chicago, and despite her failing health and compromised ability to walk, attended Liz’s senior show.

She was not a complainer, but neither was she a one-dimensional positive thinker. She knew how to express her grief and rage against the disease that was stealing her life, while always seeking the higher ground. Ten days before she died, on oxygen and morphine, she uttered the final words that Dan would hear her speak: “I’m doing pretty well.”

An open house memorial will be hosted at Hoofprint Workshop gallery (2433 S. Oakley Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60608) on Friday, August 19, 2016, from 10 am until 5 pm. There will also be an online memorial at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/rememberingmary/>

Those who knew Mary and have photos or written memories for this site can send them to [lizborn@gmail.com](mailto:lizborn@gmail.com) or mail them to Liz Born, 2433 S. Oakley Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60608.

Memorial gifts in honor of Mary can be made to the Huntington’s Disease Society of America (make checks out to HDSA Illinois chapter), and mailed to Charlotte Rybarczyk, HDSA Illinois chapter treasurer, 3000 Owl Drive, Rolling Meadows, Illinois 60008.