

The Almanac

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NEWS

Founder of Menlo Park Academy of Dance, RoseAnn Sayler, dies at 96

Memorial service set for Jan. 31 at Menlo Church



by **Kate Bradshaw**

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RoseAnn Sayler, a longtime Menlo Park resident who founded the Menlo Park Academy of Dance and participated in the city's civic life for many years, died Jan. 5 at age 96.

She was born June 19, 1923, in Muskogee, Oklahoma, the fifth of seven children born to Al and Rose Smith.

Sayler began dancing as a child when she caught a lucky break. Her sister would often help walk one of her friends across town to attend dancing lessons, but one day, her sister couldn't go because she didn't finish her chores, so she went instead.

She initially merely watched her friend during the lesson, held in the home of a woman named Miss Bonnie, Sayler wrote in an autobiographical piece published in The Almanac in 1998. When the lesson switched to tumbling on a mat, though, her eagerness to participate became evident and Miss Bonnie asked if she'd like to try it.

"She taught me a backbend and I haven't stopped bending since then," Sayler wrote.

She went on to participate in and win amateur contests before winning a contest to dance at the Dallas Centennial Celebration.

Later in her childhood, her family relocated to Stillwater, Oklahoma, where she attended high school. They moved there because her father, a fireman, was asked to teach chemical warfare at Oklahoma State during World War II.

Upon arriving there, she approached a local dance teacher to inquire about lessons. But when she danced for the teacher, the instructor said she “would like to know as much as I did” and suggested that she open a dance school.

“So I did,” Sayler wrote.

She finished high school in two years, and while there she also picked up baton twirling and joined the orchestra.

At 16, she auditioned and was accepted to tour with a professional company in Oklahoma City; she traveled with a troupe across the U.S. performing with a ventriloquist, a singer and others. She continued to perform throughout college at Oklahoma State, where she once presented 27 dances in one day.

After graduating, she danced in San Francisco. Later, she studied by day at the San Francisco Ballet school and at night danced in Mountain View at a night club called the Bon Ton. It was there she met the son of the club’s owner, Lewis Sayler, whom she would later marry.

She continued studying, earning certification for secondary education, working as a member of Dance Masters of America, and attending National Dance conventions and workshops.

In 1947, she founded RoseAnn Dance Studio, first located at 1259 El Camino Real before it moved to 1163 El Camino Real in 1949, with a short stint in a four-car garage in between, according to the Menlo Park Historical Association. It was renamed the Menlo Park Academy of Dance in 1969 and is now the official school for Menlowe Ballet, Menlo Park’s professional ballet company.

Over the years, Sayler wrote, many of her students have become dance teachers, won scholarships through pageants, gone on to dance on Broadway, and danced with the San Francisco Ballet and various dance companies around the U.S. and Europe.

Sayler was also active in Menlo Park's civic community. She served for 15 years on the city's recreation board and five years on the arts commission.

She is preceded in death by her husband Lewis and her six siblings. She was known for her infectious smile and strong determination as well as her love of children, according to her niece, Sheri House.

A memorial service will be held at Menlo Church at 950 Santa Cruz Ave. at 2 p.m. on Friday, Jan. 31.

The family prefers that memorial donations be made to the [Menlo Park Academy of Dance](#) Scholarship fund.

Information provided by her family and [previous writing](#) published in The Almanac to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Menlo Park Academy of Dance.



RoseAnn Sayler, founder of the Menlo Park Academy of Dance, died on Jan. 5 at age 96. Photo courtesy of her family.