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Ex-Ill. Gov. George Ryan's wife dies at age 76

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Lura Lynn Ryan, the former Illinois first lady who spent the waning years of her life seeking freedom for imprisoned former Gov. George Ryan, quietly spent her final moments with her husband of 55 years at her side.By **SOPHIA TAREEN**

Associated Press

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Lura Lynn Ryan, the former Illinois first lady who spent the waning years of her life seeking freedom for imprisoned former Gov. George Ryan, quietly spent her final moments with her husband of 55 years at her side.

She died late Monday evening at Riverside Medical Center in Kankakee after a long bout with cancer, said Kankakee County Coroner Robert Gessner. She was 76.

Ryan had been released from his prison cell in Terre Haute, Ind., to spend several hours with her on Monday, one of four times since January the prison's warden has used his discretion to allow the former governor to see his ailing wife. Ryan's requests were repeatedly denied by the courts.

"It was enormously important to him and to her," said Ryan attorney former Gov. Jim Thompson. "They've been together all their lives really."

Lura Lynn Ryan had been diagnosed with lung cancer and hospitalized last week because she was having trouble breathing. She was placed on a respirator last week and taken off it Monday night after it appeared nothing else could be done, Thompson said.

She was a steadfast supporter of the former governor, whom she had met in high school, and maintained that he had never done anything wrong during his lengthy political career.

They met as teenagers and had six children together, including a set of triplets. Friends described the couple as "nearly inseparable."

"If you could approach Lura Lynn, you were approaching George," said Tony Leone, a family friend and former aide to George Ryan. "She was always at his side."

The former governor, serving time on federal corruption charges, was quietly escorted from the Indiana prison to be with her four separate times about 130 miles away. The first was in January to the intensive care unit at a Kankakee hospital. He was let out when she began chemotherapy and again over the weekend when her health took a turn for the worse. Each visit lasted only a few hours, Thompson said.

Federal Bureau of Prisons spokesman Chris Burke declined to comment.

It was unclear if Lura Lynn recognized her husband in all the final visits, Thompson said. In the first she drifted in and out of sleep and struggled to speak while he was there. The secret visit was not revealed until two days later, when federal prosecutors mentioned it in a court filing arguing against a request by Ryan's lawyers to have him released on bail so he could spend more time with his dying wife.

During Monday's visit, family members believed Lura Lynn may have squeezed her husband's hand.

"She died peacefully not too long afterwards," Thompson said.

Court records show Ryan's attorneys petitioned an appellate court on Friday to allow Ryan to leave the prison and visit his wife in the hospital but the court denied the request.

Ryan was convicted on federal corruption charges in 2006, and has served three years of a 6 1/2-year sentence for racketeering, conspiracy, tax fraud and making false statements to the FBI.

Lura Lynn Lowe grew up in the Kankakee County village of Aroma Park where her family, originally from Germany, had lived since 1834. Her father owned one of the nation's first hybrid seed companies.

She moved to Kankakee for high school. She and the former governor met in a high school English class. Together, they have five daughters, one son and more than a dozen grandchildren.

Family friends and public officials called her a devoted mother, wife and grandmother who was gracious to everyone she met.

Illinois State Treasurer Dan Rutherford called her death a "tremendous loss."

"Public service requires sacrifice and dedication from not only elected officials, but also their spouses," Rutherford said in a statement. "Lura Lynn was a constant supporter, encourager and counselor to former Governor George Ryan for many years. She was a warm and caring friend to me and countless others."

Lura Lynn Ryan had no idea when they got married that her husband would go into politics. He started life as a Kankakee drug store owner. But his brother was mayor and she started to think her husband might run for office when he helped a friend who was running for the county board and seemed to have a flair for politics.

The climb was steady, from a seat in the General Assembly to lieutenant governor to secretary of state and finally the governorship - reaching the pinnacle of both state government and Illinois' Republican establishment. She spoke admiringly of the mansion in Springfield - her official home for four years - and co-wrote a book on it called, "At Home with Illinois Governors: A Social History of the Illinois Executive Mansion, 1855-2003."

Prosecutors say the road to the top for George Ryan was marred by corruption. But she focused on the positive, including Ryan's unprecedented commuting of all 156 inmates on Illinois' death row before leaving office in 2003, and his efforts to curb drunken driving.

She made it a priority to participate in charitable causes, such as a program to influence teenagers to avoid drug and alcohol abuse.

"As my children grew older and I could be with him (Ryan), I kind of took up my little causes," she said. "And I think we did make a difference."

She also championed early development of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield and promoted literacy programs.

Ryan was convicted in 2006 of steering state contracts and leases to political insiders while he was secretary of state and then governor for one term. He received vacations and gifts in return.

He also was accused of stopping an investigation into secretary of state employees accepting bribes in exchange for truck driver's licenses.

In 2000, Lura Lynn Ryan was pulled into the licenses-for-bribes scandal when a woman claimed she'd handed her a letter in 1998 detailing corruption at a truck licensing facility.

The alleged hand-off happened at an event nine months before George Ryan was elected governor, and the former first lady said she didn't remember the letter or the woman. Lura Lynn Ryan grew increasingly frail during her final years, appearing at her husband's court appearances with an oxygen tank.

Friends, who remembered her as strong-willed and a trusted advisor, said Tuesday that the family pulled together closer in the past years.

"The rollercoaster life of any politician can kind of break families apart, it did just the opposite," Leone said. "It united that family. They were unbelievable strong."

Funeral services were being arranged by Schreffler Funeral Homes in Kankakee. A funeral home spokesman said details hadn't been finalized but services would be private at the family's request.

Thompson said a public memorial may be held at a later date.

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