



## Catherine Olmer

July 8, 1948 - November 18, 2023

Catherine Olmer, age 75, passed away at her home in Bloomington, IN, Saturday, November 18, 2023. A professor of physics and founding director of Bloomington's WonderLab Museum, she left this life expressing characteristic curiosity not only about her illness, but also about what lay beyond.

Cathy was born July 8, 1948, in Boston, MA, to the late Philip and Norma (Levine) Olmer. She is survived by her brother, Jonathan Olmer, and his wife Valorie, as well as nieces Janelle Olmer and Rachel (Olmer) Montgomery and great-nephew Caelen Montgomery.

Cathy became fascinated by science during her childhood, when she spent many happy hours exploring in the Boston Museum of Science. She gravitated toward the field of physics as an undergraduate at Boston University, and later earned her doctorate at Yale University. She continued research in newly developing areas of nuclear physics while completing post-doctoral work at the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory and the Argonne National Laboratory and after becoming a faculty member of the Indiana University Physics Department in 1979.

To say that this career path in the late 1960s and early 1970s was difficult is an understatement. In nearly all of her undergraduate and graduate physics classes, Cathy was the only female student. While she had several supportive professors, she also had to endure others, including one professor who handed out blue exam books to all the male students and then gave her a pink exam book. She later said that such experiences gave her the message

that she wasn't supposed to be there. She responded to such challenges by remembering her mother's advice to "never give up" – words that she used to overcome obstacles throughout her life.

In addition to her substantial physics research, Cathy found that she enjoyed teaching courses in physics for elementary education majors to help them create hands-on activities for the classroom that would excite young children about science. She also enjoyed serving as a role model through hands-on outreach activities for students K-12 throughout south-central Indiana, including IU's annual Physics Open House (now Science Fest) and the Girl Scouts Science Day. She was famously generous in giving time to nurture and advise young people in their science interests and aspirations.

In 1995, Cathy joined forces with Deborah Kent and others to explore the possibility of creating a science museum not only for children, but for people of all ages to experience the wonder and excitement of science. This became the beloved WonderLab Museum of Science, Health and Technology – first opening in 1998 in an interim space and then moving in 2003 to a dedicated building in downtown Bloomington. Cathy served as executive director of the museum until 2017, at which point she "stepped down" into the role of chief financial officer, a role she filled until her death.

Recognition of Cathy's achievements was widespread. IU honored her with the Herman B Wells Lifetime Achievement Award (2004), the Distinguished Service Award (2005), and the George W. Pinnell Award for Outstanding Service (2006) before her retirement in 2012. In the community, she received the Phenomenal Women of Bloomington award (1997), the Women in Technology award (2000), and was honored as the Bloomington Woman of the Year (2002).

During a 2017 NPR StoryCorps interview, Cathy reflected about her life's work. She said that while she loved her physics research, "the one thing I've done that has had the most impact on me, on others, on the community is WonderLab. So, I look at that as something that is going to affect millions and millions of children and schools and families, and I'm really happy about that."

The family is grateful to IU Health Hospice and Cathy's caregivers during her illness – her friends Colleen Couper, Jeanne Gunning, Karen Jepson-Innes, Ruth Presutti, Louise Schlesinger, and Esther Smail. Allen Funeral Home and Crematory has been entrusted with arrangements. Cremation rites have been accorded. Online condolences, photos and memories may with shared with the family and friends at [www.allencares.com](http://www.allencares.com).

A memorial event will be held in spring 2024 at the WonderLab Museum. In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations be made to the Catherine and Norma Olmer Education Endowment Fund at the WonderLab Museum.

# Tribute Wall

ED

“ I am saddened to learn of Dr. Olmer's passing. I was a student at the summer research program she directed at the Indiana University Cyclotron Facility. She gathered together undergraduate students, graduate students and research faculty and staff to create a program that benefited everyone involved. She also took extra time out to create a program that benefited the students on a social level as well, including hiking and canoeing trips. She will be sorely missed.

*Eric Dean (IUCF 1990 class)*

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**Eric J Dean** - December 28, 2023 at 05:42 PM

ES

“ My condolences to you and other loved ones.  
She lived her life well and admirably.

*Dionne*

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**Esther S** - December 13, 2023 at 09:36 AM

ES

“ Cathy was a force of nature, and I admired her so much.  
We will all miss her, but I'm happy to think she knew how much we all loved her, and also I'm glad that she knew that the wonderful thing she started will go on into the far future.

*Elizabeth R*

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**Esther S** - December 13, 2023 at 09:35 AM

PE

“ I was saddened and shocked to read Catherine's obituary in yesterday's newspaper. As a colleague of hers on the IU Physics Dept. and a collaborator on numerous nuclear physics experiments at the IU Cyclotron Laboratory, I worked closely with Catherine for 25 years. Equally importantly, I worked with her on the planning and initial operation of the WonderLab Museum. She always was such a wonderful, friendly, enthusiastic, helpful person in both her professional and private life, a joy to work with and a pleasure to interact socially with (I fondly remember Catherine's garden parties). I am particularly saddened that she was taken from us so early in her retirement age by her illness. Please accept my sincere condolences, and please inform me of the date of her planned memorial service so that I may attend. With my deepest regards,  
Peter Schwandt, professor emeritus.

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**Peter Schwandt, professor emeritus** - December 05, 2023 at 02:16 PM