

Colleen E. Cortese

August 26, 1934 - February 13, 2026

Colleen Ellen Cortese passed away peacefully at her family's Elysian Valley Ranch in Janesville, California on 2026. Colleen's loving family was at her bedside. She is survived by her daughter Teresa Cortese and three grandchildren, Joe Meyer (Nora), Makaela Shively (Jimmy) and Gino Meyer. Colleen's sunshine was her three great-grandchildren, Vincenzo, Kaelahni and Julian with another child on the way. Colleen was preceded in death by her beloved husband Vince Cortese, Jr., to whom she was married for nearly 70 years. After living in a modest ranch house in San Jose, Colleen designed a house to meet the family's needs and Vince built it in 1970. Together they hosted seven foreign exchange students in their family home over the years from many countries including Colombia, Switzerland, Germany, Finland, Brazil and Japan.

Colleen and Vince were partners and participants in numerous extended family endeavors in the Santa Clara Valley such as farming apricots, cherries and prunes, ranching, commercial real estate, philanthropy and public service. Colleen was recognized as a local historian with special interests in San Jose's Evergreen area and the Bay Area's Native American settlements and contributions. Through a series of articles published in the Evergreen Times titled "Evergreen Pathways" she chronicled the region's unique story. She co-created the Heritage Collection at Evergreen Valley Community College which included more than 100 photographs documenting local people, industries, schools and daily life from the 1800s through the 1900s. The collection was officially donated in 1991. She was also known as "Mrs. Pumpkin" to thousands of school children every October when she dressed as a kind Halloween figure to delight and inform thousands of students who would take school field trips to the Cortese Fruit Stand on San Felipe Road in San Jose.



Colleen and Vince were instrumental benefactors in the formation and construction of the Catholic parish St. Francis of Assisi in Evergreen, working closely with the late former Pastor Monsignor John Sandersfeld, and others. Teresa Cortese says her mother's true passion project was the parish because of "her love for Jesus, community, and family." Colleen is also preceded in death by her parents Joseph and Gladys Buckley and brother, Joseph Alan Buckley (Bonnie).

She was born on August 26, 1934 in Bakersfield, CA. Her childhood was spent in a large farmhouse in Wasco, CA. While attending Bakersfield College, Colleen was crowned Miss "Magic Maiden" and represented Kern County at the California State Fair in 1953. She became a professional dancer and performed with the Horace Heidt band. After moving to San Jose, Colleen worked at the former downtown Hales department store. Later, she joined the leadership team at the former Emporium department store at Eastridge Mall.

In retirement, Colleen's hobbies were reading, gardening, walking and visiting with friends and family.