



### [Sophie Starzenski](#)

Sept. 7, 1921 - March 14, 2012

ELKHART - Sophie Starzenski, 90, of Elkhart, passed away on Wednesday afternoon, March 14, 2012, at Elkhart General Hospital. She was born on Sept. 7, 1921, in Elyria, Ohio, to the late Frank and Paulina (Neispodzinski) Starzenski. In addition to her parents, she was preceded in death by four brothers, Paul, Frankie, Kazmer and Rudy Starzenski; and a sister, Gennie Starzenski. Sophie is survived by her caregivers, Tom and Terry Wiley; nieces, Kathy and Linda Starzenski and Penny Fernandez; nephew, Chuck Starzenski; and sister-in-law, Ethel "Kennie" Starzenski. Sophie served for many years in the United States Army and then in the United States Marine Corps during the Korean War. She was a longtime member of St. Vincent DePaul Catholic Church, Rosary Society, and the Daughters of Isabella. She was an avid bicycle rider; her dog "Pepper" loved to ride with her. Mass of Christian Burial will be celebrated on Monday, March 19, 2012, at 10:00 a.m. in the St. Vincent DePaul Catholic Church, 1108 S. Main St., Elkhart, where friends may also call for 1 hour prior to the start of Mass. The Rev. Glenn Kohrman will officiate. Burial with military honors by the U.S. Marine Corps Honor Guard will follow at St. Vincent Cemetery. A dinner will be provided at the church after the burial. Friends may call from 2-6 p.m. Sunday, March 18, 2012, at the Billings Funeral Home, 812 Baldwin St., Elkhart. A parish vigil and Rosary Service will conclude the evening at 6:00 p.m. Memorials for Sophie may be made to Pets for Vets, Inc., 409 Black Diamond Drive, Wilmington, NC 28411. Online condolences may be sent to [www.billingsfuneralhome.com](http://www.billingsfuneralhome.com).

**Published in South Bend Tribune on March 16, 2012**

**ELKHART — Sophie Starzenski, one of Elkhart’s best-known personalities, died Wednesday at age 90.**

People described her in colorful terms: opinionated, intelligent, compassionate, unique, interesting, complicated, dogmatic, frugal, a survivor.

But beyond the unforgettable image of the gray-haired protester decked out in a leopard-print bikini near City Hall, her compassionate side was known to its full extent by only a few.

Sophie [came into Terry Wiley’s life in 2001](#).

Wiley said Sophie had no running water, heat or electricity, so she’d spend her days at the Elkhart Public Library, where Wiley worked. One day someone stole Sophie’s bike, so Wiley began driving Sophie to and from the library.

“I invited her to my house, and she never left,” said Wiley, her caregiver for the last 10 years.

The two developed a strong friendship, to the extent that they adamantly called themselves a “package deal,” should either of them meet a man. Wiley did meet someone — her husband, Tom — who happily accepted Sophie as part of his family, as Sophie and Terry welcomed Tom into theirs.

Sophie [donated her house to a family](#) whose home was destroyed in Hurricane Katrina.

But her generosity didn't stop there. She was also the anonymous donor who paid for the funeral for TaraNova Glick, [the 4-year-old girl beaten to death](#) by her mother's boyfriend in 2004, Wiley said. Only Wiley and the funeral home knew of Sophie's generosity until after her death.

The Wileys and Sophie spent much of the last 10 years taking trips all over the world, Wiley said, because Sophie had always wanted to travel. They took a trip to Key West and they visited Rome when John Paul II was Pope because "she had been so excited it was a Polish pope," Wiley said.

Wiley had also found old letters in Sophie's belongings and located some of her relatives in Poland. They made plans to visit, and Sophie was worried that she would not remember how to speak Polish. Within five minutes of visiting with her family, she was fully engaged in conversation, Wiley said.

In her years caring for Sophie, Wiley said the only problem she ever had was Sophie's food hoarding, though it was easily remedied with the help of Wiley's cocker spaniel, Buffy, who sniffed out any hidden food when Sophie wasn't around.

"She just never knew if she would get another meal," Wiley said of Sophie.

Five years ago, Wiley left her job to take care of Sophie, who relied on a wheelchair.

"I knew I could always get another job, but I could never get another Sophie," Wiley said.

Wiley also helped Sophie get her financial affairs in order, including pre-arrangements for her funeral. Sophie, a former U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Army veteran, initially picked out the least expensive casket she could find, but Wiley would have none of it.

"'You have lived like a pauper your entire life. You have the money. You're getting a nice casket,' I told her," Wiley said.

Wiley also helped Sophie get a Marine uniform, in which she will be buried, medals she earned during her service more than a half-century ago and a special casket for veterans of the Marines. Sophie also will be buried with a bottle of Seagrams and a bottle of 7-Up, the ingredients of her favorite cocktail, a 7-and-7.

Sophie's life before Wiley was a bit more eccentric.

She was born in Elyria, Ohio, and lived in Michigan and South Bend before moving to Elkhart with her family — parents Frank and Pauline, three brothers and a sister — when she was young.

She was well known around the city, often seen riding her bicycling with her canine companion running next to her. She never learned to drive a car.

Tom Cutler, former Elkhart police chief, had what he characterized as a long relationship with Sophie, whom he called Elkhart's "character."

Cutler said Sophie had mental health issues "we didn't know exactly how to deal with," but credited Wiley with helping to manage her friend's illness.

Cutler said police wrote Sophie, and she wanted EPD to investigate when her dog was hit by a car. He'd listen to her and give her coffee. He has photos of her, including one when she picketed former Mayor Eleanor Kesim in the lobby of the police department.

The former chief attended [Sophie's 90th birthday party](#) and said she was a different person on medication. "She wasn't near as angry and near as paranoid" about people being out to get her, he said.

Cutler said Sophie was intelligent. While she could go off on a tangent and misrepresent facts, she was "never completely misinformed," he said.

"She was a unique individual to say the very least," said Elkhart City Council member Mary Olson, who acted as Sophie's guardian for a short time. "I really cared about her. She was, in my lifetime I am certain, the most unique person I will ever have the pleasure of meeting."

Olson knows from personal experience that Sophie could go from being your friend one day to picketing you the next.

People often didn't understand Sophie's behavior and they were "probably a tad bit envious of her freedom and her ability to not care what her fellow man thought," Olson said.

Olson would get calls from residents who saw Sophie Dumpster diving. Olson would go help her out of the container. She'd also come to Sophie's aid when her dog, Pepper Babe, was sick or injured. "All of her devotion and care went to Pepper," Olson said.

Sophie's upbringing made her what she was: "She had taken care of herself under tough circumstances for many years. She was the true definition of a survivor," Olson said. "Her dad raised her to take care of herself."

He also taught her to be frugal. "If she did have liquidity, she knew how to stretch it," Olson said.

Olson recalled a time when she brought Sophie a bouquet of flowers for her birthday. The two met on the Elkhart Civic Plaza and Sophie cried because she said no one had ever given her flowers before. Then they went to McDonald's for lunch. "That was her favorite place for lunch," Olson said, noting Sophie would always keep the hamburger wrapper.

A 1941 graduate of Elkhart High School, Sophie ran for several public offices — including county sheriff, coroner, mayor and judge — as a Democrat. She also was a frequent visitor to City Hall and a regular caller to WTRC's "Sound Off" program.

"If there was an issue, if she felt her rights were being impinged upon somehow, she was dogmatic," Olson said.

Sophie also had a number of run-ins with City Hall over code enforcement issues on her properties.

She called herself a "practicing environmentalist," the reason she saved everything and often ended up in trouble with the city, which cleaned up her properties several times.

Olson said the last time she saw Sophie was two years ago. "Sophie did not recognize people. That was

hard for me. I felt bad when she didn't recognize me, but the illness of dementia kind of got its grips on her," Olson said.

Sophie's funeral is Monday morning. Read Sophie's obituary [on Page A6 of today's Elkhart Truth](#).

