

Karen Dunning Obituary

Karen Dianne Dunning, 64, died peacefully, on October 1, 2021, after a courageous battle with cancer, surrounded by family and friends at her home on Mercer Island, WA. Karen was an inspiration to others as she danced through a myriad of life experiences as an entrepreneur, actress, musician, singer, songwriter, composer, author, philanthropist, and international traveler.

Karen was born on December 3, 1956, in Everett, WA to Dorothy and Earl Dunning and raised in Kearney and Lincoln, NE. She graduated from Lincoln East High School and earned a Bachelor of Science, Business Administration, Finance from the University of Nebraska – Lincoln. She began her professional career as a Systems Engineer and Marketing Representative at IBM, specializing in the banking industry. After IBM, she successfully launched, owned, and operated three multi-million dollar businesses in Lincoln, NE. She was a pioneer in the computer presentation equipment business and her companies were included in Inc. Magazine’s “500 Fastest Growing Privately Owned Businesses.” Karen was named “Nebraska Entrepreneur of the Year” in 1996, was invited to attend the White House Summit (to develop US business strategy for the White House), and was a member of Nebraska Governor Ben Nelson’s CEO Roundtable. She participated in trade missions to Japan, Hong Kong, and China, and served as a Nebraska Diplomat member for over 20 years.

Karen was particularly passionate about mentoring women and girls in entrepreneurship. She established an endowment, The Karen Dunning Fund for Women’s Studies, which provides scholarships for students, at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, where she was an active alumna, member of the Chancellor’s Club, and frequent speaker at entrepreneurial conferences. In addition, she served as a Professor of Entrepreneurship at American University in Yola, Nigeria.

At age 40, she sold her company (Business Media, Inc.) and moved to the west coast to pursue her love of music. She earned an Associate of Arts in Music at the College of Marin, CA, and was a singer, songwriter, and composer, played piano and guitar, and performed at various venues. She joined the Screen Actors Guild (SAG-AFTRA) and acted and sang in many movies, TV shows, and on stage.

In addition to her professional and philanthropic work, Karen was politically active, advocating for causes that were important to her and singing for charity and political events. She combined her love of music and her advocacy efforts to found and sponsor an international Peace Song contest to encourage songwriters to write lyrics to promote world peace.

To empower women, Karen shared her personal and professional journey in her recently published memoir, “Sparkly and Strong: Suing IBM, Surviving Domestic Violence, Thriving as an Entrepreneur by Age 40.” The companion journal to her book (designed for women to apply Karen’s lessons learned to their own life experiences), along with her celebration of life video, is available at KarenDunning.org.

Throughout her life, Karen was affiliated with many organizations including: National Association of Women Business Owners, Planned Parenthood, the Lincoln Lancaster County Commission on the Status of Women, Nova Business & Professional Women, YWCA, United Way, Nashville Songwriter’s Association International (NSAI), SAG-AFTRA, Nebraska Arts Council, Nebraska Diplomats, Rotary Club (Mercer Island, WA and Lincoln, NE), Chambers of Commerce (Kansas City, Omaha, Des Moines, Lincoln, NE), Lincoln Independent Business Association, and Pi Beta Phi Alumni Club.

Karen is survived by her sister Linda, brothers Steven and David, nieces Joy and Allison, nephews Jona and David, great niece Mila, and great nephews Luca, Keda, and Charlie.

A memorial service will be held on October 23, 2021, 2:00pm at Mercer Island United Methodist Church, 7070 SE 24th Street, Mercer Island, WA. A second service will be held at the Wyuka Funeral Home & Cemetery, 3600 O Street, Lincoln, NE (date to be determined).

Memorial donations may be made in Karen's honor to the Karen Dunning Fund for Women's Studies, in care of the University of Nebraska Foundation, 1010 Lincoln Mall Suite 300 Lincoln, NE 68508 or through this [link](#), or to [SeattleHumane.org](#).