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Wayne's friends recall warmth

BY KELLIE SCHMITT CALIFORNIAN STAFF WRITER kschmitt@bakersfield.com

Sheryl Barbich had planned to visit Wendy Wayne on Sunday, but relatives suggested she should stop by Saturday instead. Time was running out.

The two longtime friends sat in Wayne's Bakersfield home and joked about being political polar opposites. They reminisced about taking long walks on the beach at Cayucos, chatting for hours.

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By Felix Adamo / The Californian

Wendy Wayne, seeking appointment to board of supervisors in 2010.

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"I said, 'Wendy you've made a difference in so many people's lives,'" Barbich said, her voice shaking. "I told her, 'You've lived nine lives.'"

Like many Bakersfield residents, Barbich struggled to find the words to express Wayne's indelible impact on not only the community but her own personal life. As news of her death spread after she passed Sunday, residents called Wayne "an inspiration," a hero who won't be forgotten.

While her professional accomplishments loom large, what many reflected on Sunday were the close personal ties Wayne fostered.

"The thing about Wendy is she always asks what you're doing," Barbich said. "I'd have to say, 'Wait, I called to ask how you're doing.'"

Even as she became more ill in recent months, Wayne still thought of her friends first.

When her illness forced her to skip a meeting of a regular luncheon group, she called ahead to the restaurant to pay the bill and order a bottle of wine.

As Barbich sat with Wayne this weekend, she asked her if she had any unfinished projects. Wayne said she wanted to finish writing something for her grandchildren, some of whom she hadn't yet met.

Her two sons weren't in the area this weekend since both of their families are expecting babies, one in just 10 days.

Wayne wanted to tell her grandchildren about the choices she made that shaped her life's journey, such as why she went to Kenya and lived in a mud hut, or why she followed the man she loved to Bakersfield.

Later this year, the family plans to host a celebration of Wayne's life, during which they'll honor the myriad contributions she has made. No date has been set.

"This has been a long battle for her, but she was happy she could go out on her own terms," said son Larkin Tackett, 33. "Even in her last days, she didn't want to be an extra burden on anyone."

Having such a strong outpouring of support among the community is helping the family cope with a difficult loss, Tackett added.

One of those community members is City Councilwoman Sue Benham, who has been friends with Wayne since their grown children were in grade school together. While her leadership in the community and her professional roles were so esteemed, Benham, too, says she'll most remember Wayne's friendship.

"No one enjoyed life's celebrations more, treasured her friends more, and no one listened better," she said. "She set the standard for everything you want to be in life."