



Mary Helen Spencer

May 9, 1945 - September 2, 2025

After some 27 years of practicing law focused on Native American Indians, Helen Spencer became acutely aware of how undetected and undiagnosed vision issues were adversely affecting young people belonging to minority and disadvantaged people groups. Helen's concern and call to action is well summed up and expressed by this quote from a social policy expert who supported Helen's advocacy work: "It is unconscionable that we do not help these children deal with what are often easily curable problems that dramatically improve their ability to learn and to succeed in life." (Dr. Gary Orfield, UCLA).

This call to action became Helen's all-consuming passion in her later years of life. Helen was a driving force behind several key initiatives to help kids see better and improve learning. She voluntarily supervised "The AmeriCorps Child Vision Project" in the Lower Yakima Valley of Washington State. This work led to Helen's significant advocacy and tireless efforts that resulted in the ultimate creation and passage of the Washington State Senate Bill 6245. This bill specifies that, in addition to distance vision screening already being done, children must also be screened to identify possible near vision issues -- which pose challenges to a child's ability to learn. Helen also helped bring the community together to support the creation of a "center" that would focus on next-generation technologies and screening approaches with the goal to increase access for vision screening and therapies for rural and underserved communities. This quest ultimately resulted in the creation of the EYE

Research Group at UW Bothell and the Near Vision Institute (NVI) which provides mobile and school optometry services. Helen was instrumental in identifying funding opportunities that resulted in several technology development grants and a mobile vision clinic that is now co-managed by NVI and the EYE Research Group. The mobile vision clinic serves communities throughout the State of Washington and is a model program that other states and countries are learning from. To further awareness, Helen often contributed her own money to fund initiatives such as producing videos of subject matter experts who explained near vision issues that are prone to occur in young people. Helen placed much pride and importance in finding ways to share the stories of those affected by near vision problems. This work influenced many – and has resulted in creating a community of people focused on helping children experiencing challenges resulting from undiagnosed vision issues.

Mary Helen Spencer was born on May 9, 1945 in Lander, Wyoming. She was the fourth child of the five children of Charles and Julia Spencer. Her father, Charles S. Spencer spent his career working for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. As a consequence, Helen moved with her family to various Native American Indian Reservations throughout the Northwest. The family was housed in government housing on the agencies located at the Wind River Reservation, in Fort Washakie, WY; the Standing Rock Reservation, in Fort Yates, ND; the Blackfeet Reservation in Browning, MT; the Flathead Reservation in Dixon, MT; the Fort Hall Reservation, in Fort Hall, ID; and finally the Yakama Reservation in Toppenish, WA.

In 1963 Helen graduated near the top of her high school class in Blackfoot, Idaho. Hers was a notable class that included the future founders of Micron Technology in Boise, Idaho. After her graduation, Helen enrolled as an undergraduate at the University of Washington in Seattle. Soon after she met and married Hiram Paul Groshell. In the summer of 1967 Helen and Hiram joined the Peace Corps serving for two years in the Maharashtra State of India.

After completing the tour with the Peace Corps, Helen and Hiram traveled

extensively before returning to their studies at the University of Washington. Helen eventually graduated from the UW with a bachelor's degree in English literature. After Hiram enrolled in the Willamette University School of Law (Salem, Oregon), Helen enrolled in the University of Oregon School of Law where she graduated as the law class president in the Spring of 1976. Hiram and Helen were divorced in 1978.

Helen began her career helping Native Americans by joining Colorado Rural Legal Services, Durango, CO, in 1977. In 1980 Helen joined the Native American Project at Evergreen Legal Services in Yakima, Washington. There, Helen also dedicated herself to helping her parents who retired in Zillah, Washington. She was especially devoted to caring for her widowed mother, Julia, for decades after the passing of Julia's husband, Charles. Helen loved a good party and hosted many celebratory dinners that included Julia. This is not to mention the many American Indian Pow Wows that Helen reveled in attending.

From Evergreen Legal Services, Helen transitioned in 1996 to a similar role at Columbia Legal Services, Yakima. After leaving that office in 2004, Helen continued to advocate for native American Indian health and elder law until her own failing health prevented any further advocacy for Indian health, vision, and legal rights.

Helen is survived by her brothers Chuck and Tom Spencer. She was preceded in death by her two sisters, Betty Keller and Jean Sweeney, and her parents, Charles and Julia Spencer. Helen is also survived by five nieces and nephews and by seven grand nieces and grand nephews.

Funeral Services will be held at the Colonial Funeral Home in Toppenish, Washington with burial at the Zillah Cemetery, Zillah, Washington.

Gifts in memory of Helen can be made to the "UW Bothell Children's Vision Research Fund" A gift to this fund may be made online at <https://www.washington.edu/giving/make-a-gift>

or by sending a gift designated for this fund to University of Washington, Box

359505, Seattle, WA 98195-9505.

Other ways to give in memory of Helen:

Go to the web location www.EYESeeClinic.org and there is a Support our Mission button in the lower right corner of the page.

Additionally, there a special page for any supporters donating in memory of Helen Spencer.

<https://givebutter.com/HelenSpencer>

Previous Events

Memorial Service

SEP **19**. 10:00 AM (PT)

Heggie's Colonial Funeral Home
228 S. Alder Street
Toppenish, WA 98948
(509) 865-3222
info@heggiescolonialfuneralhome.com

Tribute Wall

CJ

“ Rest in peace beautiful Friend Helen. We served together on the Washington State Governor’s Council on Aging. She was an inspiration. Healing love to all her friends and family💜🌿

Courtney Jaren - October 27, 2025 at 11:26 PM

WH

“ I loved Helen. 40 years ago or so, Helen and I were at Richardson's Trading Post in Gallup, New Mexico, looking at jewelry. We spotted the same beautiful turquoise petite point Zuni pin at the exact same moment, so we decided to share custody, and bought it together. Since we lived thousands of miles away from each other, the agreement was we would each have it for an undetermined number of years, and the other owner would have to come and pick it up in person. I think I made it out to Washington once! I have no idea what ultimately happened to that pin, but it and Helen remain a precious memory. With much love from Wendy Henry in Minneapolis, Minnesota💕💕

Wendy Henry - October 04, 2025 at 01:20 PM

TG

“ Tiffany Goudy lit a candle in memory of Mary Helen Spencer



Tiffany Goudy - September 08, 2025 at 04:35 PM

LS

“ Love, Jim Sweeney purchased the Enchanted Cottage for the family of Mary Helen Spencer.



Love, Jim Sweeney - September 07, 2025 at 08:10 PM



“ Arrive in Style was purchased for the family of Mary Helen Spencer.



September 07, 2025 at 08:02 PM

LL

“ Thank you Helen for all the help, guidance, support and love you have given me since I met you in 1994. I love you. And you are now with my grandma and auntie and you beautiful mother. Attowishamush.

Loni Livian Long - September 05, 2025 at 08:16 PM

SR

“ It was my privilege to talk with Helen on many occasions about the needs of the Native community in our Toppenish region, especially in regard to the vision issues that Helen espoused with such commitment and energy. We share insights and I heard her support for Heritage University many times. I am so sorry that I will be traveling to California on the day of her funeral, so I will not be able to attend. I will be praying for her with admiration, and adding her relatives to my prayers for all that they need in going through this transition time. God bless you all! Sister (Dr.) Kathleen Ross, SNJM

Sister Kathleen Ross - September 05, 2025 at 06:39 PM

SL

“ Rest in peace dear Helen, you know I loved you like a sister ever since our mother brought you into our lives these past 40 plus years.

Thank you for being there for us all.

So until we meet again God be with you 🙏💕🙏💕



Saxwitam (georgette long-abrahamson) - September 05, 2025 at 04:39 PM

JS

“ Prayers for the family at this time. Helen Spencer was one of a kind and all the work she had done will never be forgotten.



Jeanne Smiskin - September 05, 2025 at 01:54 PM

SW

“ *Shasta Watlamet lit a candle in memory of Mary Helen Spencer*



Shasta Watlamet - September 04, 2025 at 03:43 PM