

In Memoriam: “Miss Nancy” Besst: a Tribute



By: **Forrest Patton**

When I received word that **Nancy Besst Townsley** had passed away, it hit me. Not only have we lost a Bay Area television icon, but a woman who expressed distinctive qualities that we're not likely to see again.

Born May 25, 1934 in Canton Ohio to **Gertrude** and **Richard Besst**. Nancy was “Miss Canton” and top of her class at McKinley High. Nancy attended Northwestern University in IL (a Delta Gamma girl) majoring in Radio and Television, and took her first job out of Baltimore, a new syndicated children's show known as *Romper Room*. She spent the first several years training the on-camera teachers in major syndicated markets throughout the country, then in 1955 she took a permanent position as Miss Nancy at KGO ABC 7 in San Francisco.

For those of us who were born and raised in the San Francisco area during the 1950s and '60s, *Romper Room* was a part of our television culture. And for many of us, Miss Nancy Besst will always be the definitive hostess and teacher on the program. Whether it was reading a story, talking about the weather (*Willy The Weatherman*), singing a song, simple exercising (Bend and stretch, Reach for the stars), or having your name called during the *Magic Mirror* segment, Nancy was gentle, patient and brought a child-like wonder (without being *childish*) to her many devoted viewers. Her on-air persona must have been successful.

After KGO, Nancy continued *Romper Room* as Miss Nancy at KTVU 2 for a total 13 year Bay Area run. Although there were many *Romper Room* teachers taking on their own names for their programs, “Miss Nancy” was iconic. It was an era of fewer channels, fewer children's shows, and live television. **Bob March** (*Silver Circle 1990*), **Charles Shultz** (*Silver Circle 1997*), **Shirley Temple Black** (*Silver Circle 1996*), **Art Linkletter**, **Herb Caen**, **Allen Drury**, **Dwight Newton** (*Silver Circle 1989*) and **Fred Rogers** were all considered her friends as well as countless others.

Even in recent times, many a Bay Area baby boomer would recognize Nancy and share some of their cherished memories as a *Romper Room Do-Bee*. She was always happy with those encounters and, at the same time, was amazed that people would still remember her and the show.

Nancy was one of the founding members of our local chapter of NATAS. She loved the Academy and was involved with its many aspects over the years. She was one of the first classes to be inducted in to the *Silver Circle*, 1988. She received the Governors' Service Medallion in 1993; the Governors' Citation in 1995; and chapter's highest honor, the Governors' Award in 1998.

Most recently, she participated with the annual *Silver Circle* Committee and the *Gold and Silver Circle Luncheons*. Our chapter has had a rich history and Nancy could share a number of stories and highlights. She was very proud of its accomplishments.

In looking back over the years, I always enjoyed talking to Nancy about the perils of working in live television. It wasn't just dealing with the spontaneity (and unpredictably) of a group of pre-schoolers. Guests could present some interesting situations.

One of Nancy's favorite on-air encounters involved a rather talkative Mynah bird named “Raja.” When originally booked for the show, Raja was guaranteed to provide continuous banter. However, for the entire hour on that particular day, neither Nancy nor the bird's owner/trainer could coax the bird to utter a single word. At the end of the show, Nancy turned to the bird and asked Raja if he had any last words for the boys and girls. As the camera zoomed in for a close-up, Raja looked straight into the lens and blurted out “One martini, please.”

Crews were also a challenge to many a kids' show host. While at KTVU, Miss Nancy celebrated her birthday on *Romper Room*. An elaborate package was delivered to her on the set. Following a rousing verse of “Happy Birthday” by the kids, Nancy

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opened the package to find a very sexy piece of lingerie. One can only imagine what the accompanying birthday card said. Again, this was live TV and Nancy didn't lose her poise or control.

Pranks were not just limited to the station crews. Fellow kids' show hosts could get in on the fun, as well. Nancy shared this story of what happened between her and KTVU cohort **Bob March**. At the station, they happened to share the same dressing room (although not at the same time). On this particular morning, Nancy entered and found Bob changing into his *Captain Satellite* uniform. Apparently, the station wanted to record some special promotional announcements and needed the Captain to appear at the same time. Normally, Bob would use the dressing room for his afternoon show. Nancy became rather flustered and embarrassed that she had walked in while Bob was changing.

As it was getting close to air-time for *Romper Room*, the kids and their mothers were sitting in the waiting area outside Studio B and adjacent to the dressing room. A short time later, Miss Nancy and Captain Satellite emerged. The Captain proudly announced to all present "Ooooh. Thanks Miss Nancy. That was great!"

As I reflect on the qualities that I will remember

most about Nancy Besst, innocence and gentleness certainly come to mind. *Romper Room* was far from being a high-tech or an action-oriented program. It was a foundation for simple instruction of the basics, the teaching of manners, and character-building, and good citizenship. Perhaps it was also a product of our generation. Things seemed to be much gentler and moved much slower back in the 1950s and '60s.

Thank you Nancy, for sharing yourself with us. Whether it was *Romper Room*, NATAS, or the countless other organizations you contributed to, all of us will remember and appreciate your tireless efforts and friendship.

Somehow, I have a feeling that Nancy will be keeping watch over her former *Do-Bees* through her Magic Mirror from a more celestial perspective.

Nancy Besst Townsley ("Nancy Besst" professionally) died in her sleep on August 14, 2011 in San Rafael. Nancy was laid to rest next to her husband in Oklahoma on Monday, Aug 22. Her husband, **Captain Pat Townsley Sr.** was killed in active duty on February 2, 1965 in a fighter plane accident at Hamilton Air Force Base in Novato. Four days later, their only child, also **Pat Townsley** was born. Nancy is survived by her son Pat, his wife **Laura**, and her two loving grandchildren, **Ellie** (12) and **Richard** (9) from San Anselmo CA. Nancy had no siblings.

Trailblazing KDKA, KPIX Boss Carolyn Wean Dies

By **Andrew Gauthier**



Carolyn Wean, a trailblazing TV executive who was a longtime station boss with Group W, died Friday, August 12th at her home after a long illness. She was 68. Wean was a TV pioneer. She was the first woman to serve as news director of a Pittsburgh station and eventually became the market's (and Group W's) first female general manager with KDKA.

In 1986, Wean was tapped as GM of Group W's KPIX and in 1993 she became vice president of news development for the station group. She retired in 2002 after a stint overseeing production for Pittsburgh's WOED.

"She left a real legacy," **Kweilin Nassar**, who worked with Wean at KDKA and WOED, told the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* recently. "She was a mentor for a lot of women."

A Baltimore native, Wean got her first TV job at WBZ and over her long career she won a slew of awards, including two Peabodys, three Emmy® statuettes, and an Edward R. Murrow award. In 2010, she was honored by the *Women and Girls Foundation* as one of Pittsburgh's leading "Women in Media."

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