



Dr. Rita Kay (Southwood) Behnke, 85, a beloved nurse, educator, and cherished family member, passed away on July 21, 2024. She was born on January 17, 1939, to Walter H. and Vera M. (Sharp) Southwood in Evansville, Indiana.

Rita dedicated her life to the service of others and the advancement of nursing education. Rita's career began with her graduation from the University of Evansville in 1960, where she earned her Bachelor's degree in Nursing. She went on to complete her Master's and PhD in Nursing, showcasing her commitment to education and excellence in her field. For over four decades, Rita was a pillar of the University of Evansville community, serving as an educator and eventually as the Dean of Nursing. Her legacy includes the establishment of the University of Evansville's school of nursing in England in 1973, making her the first woman nurse in the United States to hold a nursing license in the UK.

Beyond her professional achievements, Rita was a devoted mother, grandmother, sister, aunt, and dog lover. Her family was the center of her world, and she found immense joy in their company. Rita joyfully sang with the Evansville Philharmonic Orchestra and had a deep love for music. An avid reader, Rita had a lifelong love for books. A passionate baseball fan, Rita rarely missed a Yankees or Cubs game. Her love for the game was infectious, and she often shared this enthusiasm with friends and family.

Rita will be deeply missed by her children, grandchildren, friends, colleagues, and all who had the privilege of knowing her.

Rita is survived by her children Keith Behnke (Kay) and Lisa Kay Behnke Conner; grandsons Patrick Behnke and Sean Behnke of Evansville, IN; brother Jerry Southwood (Jeannie) of Bigfork, Montana; nieces Debbie Love (Butch) of Fargo, North Dakota and Mary Surber (Will) of Missoula, Montana; and nephews John E. Southwood Jr. (Leslie) of Nashville, Tennessee and Walter Southwood (Sara) of Lander, Wyoming; and several great-nieces, great-nephews, and extended family.

Rita was preceded in death by her parents Walter and Vera Southwood and brother John Eugene Southwood Sr.

A special thank you to her caretaker and best friend, Sheba Duvall, as well as Vanessa, Laura, and the Heart to Heart Hospice team, and to Shauntrece Deters from Deaconess Palliative Care for their care and compassion.

Visitation will be from 4-7pm on Friday, July 26, 2024 and following at 10am on Saturday, July 27, 2024 with the service at 11am at Sunset Funeral Home with a burial to directly follow at Sunset Memorial Park.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Vanderburgh Humane Society, 400 Millner Industrial Dr, Evansville, IN 47710 or Heart to Heart Hospice, 610 E Walnut Street, Suite A, Evansville, IN 47713.