

obituary

Obituaries Shattuck activist "could face down" powerful

By Virginia Culver
The Denver Post

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From left, friend March Dolphin, Deb Sanchez and sister Sherill Spaar. Sanchez was an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ (Congregational). (Special to The Denver Post)

Deb Spaar Sanchez, a community leader in getting the Shattuck radioactive waste site in south Denver cleaned up, died Oct. 5 at her Denver home. She was 57.

Sanchez had fought ovarian cancer for two years.

A service is planned at 11 a.m. Oct. 25 at Christ Congregational United Church of Christ, 2500 S. Sheridan Blvd.

"She was a courageous person, not just against her illness but in the cleanup at Shattuck," said U.S. Rep. Diana DeGette of Denver.

"She knew her cause was just. Over time the cast of characters in the fight changed, but Deb was the quiet, ever-present force in the effort," DeGette said.

"She was polite, but tough, and could face down anyone, from U.S. senators to Citicorp," said her sister, Sherill Spaar of Denver and Chama, N.M.

In 1999, after years of battling the Environmental Protection Agency, the Overland neighborhood, with the help of Congress members, finally persuaded the EPA to do a \$50 million cleanup of the site, removing 250,000 tons of material, which was shipped to Utah, according to a Denver Post story.

The cleanup of the Shattuck Superfund site, at 1805 S. Bannock St., was completed in November 2006.

The site was originally owned by E.W. Shattuck Chemical Co., which extracted chemicals, including radium, there for decades. Most are cancer-causing chemicals. Shattuck eventually sold the site to Citicorp.

The EPA first tried to quiet the anger about the 6-acre site by capping the ground with concrete.

When the site was finally cleaned and planted with grass, a ceremony was held. Sanchez, already weak from cancer, said, "In this place, at least, we have beaten our swords into plowshares."

The Shattuck site was a 12-year battle with the EPA but Sanchez had done many other things in her life

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before that campaign.

She was an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ (Congregational); was a ski patrolwoman; taught the handicapped to ski; was director of the Bach, Beethoven and Breckenridge Music Festival; was a massage therapist; and worked for the Colorado Bar Association, setting up clinics for low-income people to get legal aid.

Deborah Spaar was born in Denver on Jan. 24, 1951. She graduated from Lincoln High School and attended the University of Colorado for about two years, her sister said.

She earned her master's of divinity degree at Denver's Iliff School of Theology.

Even as a child, Deb Spaar "was one of those kids instigating something in the neighborhood," said her sister.

She lived in a "primitive" cabin in Maine for a winter to "test her survival and spiritual skills," said Sherill Spaar.

In an experimental CU program for students, she did a project on preserving the stories of migrant workers and the Latino community in McAllen, Texas. Later she was director of a radio station for the blind in Missoula, Mont.

She married Michael Sanchez in 1979, and a few years later he built their house just blocks from the Shattuck site.

He died in 1997.

She worked as a massage therapist in the 1990s but had to give up the work after an auto accident left her with limited vision in one eye and a permanent arm injury.

In addition to her sister, she is survived by her son, Lucas Sanchez.

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