

Jules Coon made a beautiful difference

A creative free spirit, her ability to nurture was boundless

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Jules Coon, gardener extraordinaire, artist and doyenne of Rappahannock's counter culture society, died on Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022.

Like almost everything in her life, Jules's death was a family affair, tied intimately to home in Coon Holler, encircled by her husband, her four children and 11 grandchildren. In keeping with her wishes, she was returned to the earth, buried among her gardens.

Jules was born June 1, 1953, in Dayton, Ohio, the only girl of six children. From the beginning, she went her own way, and in high school in the New Jersey suburbs, she was a star, a standout on the girls' basketball team and a singer in a rock-and-roll band.

After graduation, driven by a thirst for artfulness and eccentricity, she made her way across the U.S. from job to job until, in her early 20s, she reached San Francisco. She met Howard Coon there at a party in 1975. Ever after, she claimed that she knew he would be the father of her children the instant Howard walked through the door. In this crazy time at the height of hippiedom in the hippest corner of the country, they shared their first home on the corner of Haight and Ashbury.

When Eliza January was born in 1979, they wanted roots in a different sort of community, more tied to nature. So, in two cars with three dogs and a baby, they headed east, stopping for a year's final urban sojourn in Atlantic City before landing in the hills of Rappahannock in 1980.

They found a rundown house off Whorton Hollow Road that dated back to the early 1900s — a neglected barn-like structure with no indoor plumbing, no running water, and only rudimentary electricity with two outlets. A little kitchen addition with a wood cookstove and no insulation was tacked on to the back. Ever the visionary, Jules recognized it as home and unleashed her creativity to turn the place, year by year, into a shrine of art, color and curiosities.

Over the next decade, both house and family expanded. Elliott Bennett was born there in 1981, Lakota Maria and Jack Radley in 1988 and 1990. While growing their family, Jules and Howard breathed such love and vibrancy into their homeplace that it became a cultural hub for gatherings and celebrations, both intimate and grand. The door was always open, and everyone was welcome. As Coon Holler grew into a social center, Jules was its Perle Mesta, the hostess with the mostest.

And Scrabble Rabble was the most notable gathering, an annual soiree for over two decades that attracted close



COURTESY PHOTOS

Undaunted by cancer, Jules celebrated life right up to the end. Here, she toasts granddaughter Royce at the family Christmas gathering in Coon Holler, just two weeks before her death.



Above: Chanteuse was just one of the artfully creative roles that Jules Coon played. She had audiences rockin' and finger poppin' as the vocalist with the Rhythm Doctors, Venus Jones and the Big Bristols (pictured, with Barry Mothersbaugh, Terry Waggoner, Steve Pratt and Smiggy Smith).



Coon suited up in 2017.

to a thousand people in its later years. Jules was the directorial diva and grand hostess, nimbly managing crowds, keeping bands on schedule, mothering her own four children and everybody else's kids, hopping on stage herself to sing a set and orchestrating a giant potluck that stretched across eight or nine tables.

Passionately dedicated to beauty and community, her creativity was multi-faceted. She was whimsical, yet remarkably resourceful and able,

and her artful eccentricities enlivened everything she touched. Jules had a deep love of photography, toting a heavy SLR camera on her hip everywhere she went, always ready to capture a scene, snap a portrait or direct an impromptu shoot. In the 1990s, she joined 1000 Faces Mask Theater and was the performance group's "prima ballerina," as founder and director Peg Schadler described her. She was the star of every production for the first five years, performed for a quarter of a century, and in between, she

► A celebration of the life of Jules Coon will be held Mother's Day weekend, May 7, at the family home in Castleton.

The family asks that those who want to make memorial contributions or expressions of sympathy to please consider the Rappahannock Food Pantry.

helped create masks, costumes and sets.

Jules fashioned and sold clothing. She refashioned and remade old clothes into new. She painted houses. She was the vocalist in a string of popular local bands, from the Rhythm Doctors to the Big Bristols to Venus Jones. "On stage, Jules was magical," said Robert Smith AKA Smiggy, who played lead guitar in all three bands. "And she was a great inspiration to me as a songwriter. When I was worrying about whether the music would be any good, she'd insist 'Do it! Just do it!'"

Jules walked her talk and just DID about anything she set her mind to, her dedication to creating and sharing beauty always the catalyst as she transformed the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Among her talents, gardening was her personal passion, and it became her profession. She just did it! Woods were cleared, rocks collected, stumps removed, soils enriched, walkways laid and gardens designed. She grew flowers, herbs, ferns, shrubs, trees and vegetables. She learned by reading and planting, tending and trying, and acquired the equivalent of a master's degree in horticulture with a minor in herbal medicine.

Jules was the seed girl, saving her own, trading with others and even pinching a few. She was as free spirited with her gardening as everything else, sometimes planting carefully and precisely and sometimes flinging seeds by the handful at the water's edge of a pond or in bare spots along a fence line. For two decades, she designed, planted and tended beds and borders.

Her ability to nurture was boundless. A score of 20-somethings did some of their growing up in Coon Holler as Jules took in a steady stream of young people, offering shelter and guidance while they searched for the way forward. She was as fiercely kind and protective as she was creative.

With her trademark tenacity of spirit, Jules refused to be crushed by a cancer diagnosis in March 2021. She continued to garden, sing, cook and enjoy her family until her final days.

Jules Coon walked in beauty, created beauty and, to the great benefit of Rappahannock County and all who knew her, left beauty behind wherever she went.