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Artist Jeanne-Claude dies; co-created 'Running Fence'

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International artist Jeanne-Claude, one-half of the audaciously creative team that introduced Sonoma County to the world in 1976 by stretching a billowing curtain from Cotati to the sea, died Wednesday in New York City.

Jeanne-Claude, who did the driving and knocked on the doors when she and her husband, Christo, pitched their vision of "Running Fence" to western Sonoma-Marín ranchers, was 74.

She died in a New York hospital from complications of a ruptured brain aneurysm possibly brought on by a recent fall. Christo — for years the artists referred to themselves by first names only and signed all their works "Christo and Jeanne-Claude" — said through a spokesman that he will honor a mutual vow made long ago and will continue to create art.

He and Jeanne-Claude delighted in designing, promoting, erecting and then dismantling ambitious, controversial, grand-scale outdoor artworks around the world. They used 1.089 million yards of orange-yellow fabric for "The Gates" in Central Park in 2005, planted blue umbrellas through a 12-mile valley in Japan and wrapped the Reichstag in Berlin.

Recently the pair worked on preparations for "Over The River, Project for the Arkansas River, State of Colorado," an endeavor that seeks to string 5.9 miles of luminous fabric above the river. They also were refining plans for "The Mastaba," a pyramid-like structure of 410,000 brightly colored oil barrels stacked horizontally and rising 492 feet high and 984 feet wide.

Jeanne-Claude played a major role in most of the projects, and certainly in Running Fence.

"She was at least one-half of the team," Press Democrat columnist Gaye LeBaron said Thursday. LeBaron recalled that when the artists chose western Sonoma and Marin for the project in the early 1970s and then came to the region to sell the idea, it was Jeanne-Claude "who waded in."

She was the one who approached the ranchers and persuaded them to allow the curtain to cross their property. "She just charmed them, absolutely charmed them," LeBaron said.



PD FILE, 2002

Christo, left, and Jeanne-Claude sign books about their art projects at the Sonoma County Museum in 2002.

Jeanne-Claude once told LeBaron that she and Christo erected Running Fence in the summer of 1976 because their vision did not include green hills.

"We wanted the brown hills," Jeanne-Claude said. "We wanted the fabric to be like a white dress on a sun-tanned girl."

Jeanne-Claude and Christo were back in western Sonoma County just 10 weeks ago for a picnic-reunion in Bloomfield with some of the friends they made through the Running Fence saga.

Joe Tresch came, and he recalled the reaction of his Two Rock dairy family when Christo first arrived with his grand idea.

"We thought, 'This guy's a nut case,'" said Tresch, one of many early skeptics ultimately awed by the beauty and spectacle of the great curtain.

LeBaron attended the Sept. 12 reunion in Bloomfield and found Jeanne-Claude "in great form.

"Her hair was cherry red and she knew everybody by name, all the old ranchers and their wives or their widows."

Longtime Santa Rosa attorney Ed Anderson, who represented the pair during the evolution of the Running Fence, said Jeanne-Claude fell about six weeks ago. She was hospitalized briefly, then went home and three weeks ago fell into a coma, he said.

"I think it will be very difficult for Christo," Anderson said. "They were such a team. I think she played a key role with him. It really was hard to say that one was more significant than the other."

Anderson said Jeanne-Claude's roles included making sales with art collectors, the bulk of them from Europe. Anderson recalls many instances of her dazzling people with her wit and verbally lacerating critics.

During the period when she and Christo were promoting "The Gates" in Central Park, Anderson said, someone asked why they couldn't install the project somewhere else.

Jeanne-Claude responded with a question. "Did you marry the woman that you love," she asked the skeptic, "or did you marry an alternative? This is the location that we love."

Anderson has played a role in the purchase by the Smithsonian American Art Museum of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's 300-piece Running Fence exhibit. In April it will become a major display at the Washington, D.C. museum, whose director has said she considers Running Fence America's greatest piece of public art.

Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon was born in Casablanca, Morocco on the same day — June 13, 1935 — that her future husband, Christo Javacheff, was born in Bulgaria.

They met in Paris in 1958 and collaborating for 51 years on temporary public arts projects. They recycled all materials following each project.

The couple said they never accepted sponsorships and financed each temporary installation through the project itself, including the sale of their preparatory drawings, collages, scale models and original lithographs.

They made their home in Manhattan where they lived for 45 years.

Jeanne-Claude, who sported signature orange or red-dyed hair, once said that the couple, like parents who wouldn't favor one child over another, felt that, "each project is a child of ours."

She added that their favorite project was, "the next one."

Plans for a memorial will be announced at a later date. The family said her body will be donated to science, as was her wish.

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