



## Loretta Mary Wenger

December 10, 1936 - May 14, 2026

Loretta "Sis" Wenger

Loretta "Sis" Wenger, born Loretta Mary Gallagher - a nationally recognized advocate for children and families affected by addiction - died peacefully on May 14, 2026, in Mendota Heights, Minnesota. She was 89 years old.

Mrs. Wenger was born December 10, 1936, in Toledo, Ohio, to Dorothy and Francis J. Gallagher, the second of six children and the only daughter. She graduated from St. Ursula Academy in 1954 and Mary Manse College in 1958. On October 29, 1960, she married Donald J. Wenger, beginning a marriage that would take them from Toledo, Ohio, to Toronto, Ontario, and finally to Birmingham, Michigan, in 1973, and that would last nearly 50 years until his death in 2010.

Over the years, their family of four children grew to include foster children, in-laws, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. They raised their children in the same Catholic faith by which they had been raised, and they poured that same faith, love, and loyalty into the generations that followed. Grandpa's Camp at Boyne Highlands, trips to Disney World, holiday celebrations, graduations, weddings, and everything in between - they always showed up, and they were greatly loved.

To Sis and Don, family also included their brothers and in-laws, nieces and nephews, cousins, neighbors, colleagues, and the extraordinary circle of friends gathered over a lifetime - from Toledo, Boston, Toronto, Detroit, Washington, and across the country. Both together and individually, they organized and attended reunions and trips, gathered and visited friends around dinner tables and conference tables, checked in constantly, and were there - unmistakably and without hesitation - whenever someone needed them. And so many of these same family and friends were always there for them in return.

Sis was tireless. Throughout her life, she worked day and night, giving herself completely to the people she loved and to the national community she served. She loved being a Gallagher. She loved her family. And most of all, she loved being Mrs. Donald J. Wenger.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and largely through her membership with the Junior League, Sis actively volunteered throughout her communities, working closely with organizations like the American Red Cross, Cass Corridor Youth Advocates, and the Oakland County Juvenile Justice System. She was also a consistent and respected voice in matters involving her parish and each of her children's schools. In 1981, the United Foundation of Detroit honored her with its Heart of Gold Award for outstanding volunteer service in metropolitan Detroit. In 1983, she was featured in Greater, Greater Detroiters, a book profiling seventeen people judged to have made a noteworthy social impact on the southeast Michigan community.

In the early 1980s, she joined Maplegrove, the addiction treatment center associated with Henry Ford Hospital, where she co-founded its Community Education and Children's Program, and then over time emerged as one of Michigan's leading voices for prevention and family recovery. She traveled throughout the state training judges, teachers, clergy, physicians, and others

whose work brought them into contact with children, equipping them to recognize those coming from homes hurt by addiction and giving them the tools to help.

She also worked tirelessly to reach children living with addiction directly, spreading the message that they were not alone. Under a partnership between Maplegrove and the Junior League of Birmingham, she built and managed from her own home a team of hundreds of trained volunteers who visited elementary schools throughout southeast Michigan, teaching children where to turn for help if their own families were affected. By 1985, this program had reached more than 70,000 children, parents, and professionals across metropolitan Detroit. She regularly spoke in high schools and in a variety of other forums. For her work during this period, she received two presidential recognitions, including a Certificate of Appreciation from President Reagan in 1984 for her volunteer leadership during National Drug Abuse Education and Prevention Week.

In 1991, she was invited to lead what is now the National Association for Children of Addiction, which she led for more than 30 years, until she retired in 2022 at the age of 85. Under Sis's leadership, and in partnership with devoted supporters, colleagues, volunteers, clinicians, researchers, policymakers, and recovery advocates across the country, NACoA became the principal national voice for children and families affected by addiction.

Sis advised the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse. She helped Sesame Workshop develop Karli, the Muppet introduced in 2019 whose mother is in recovery from addiction. She was interviewed by Bill Moyers for his landmark 1998 PBS series Moyers on Addiction: Close to Home. She regularly testified in Congress, wrote

prolifically in academic journals, and lectured at events in person and online.

Across four decades of advocacy, she received more than two dozen national, state, and community recognitions, including most recently the NASADAD Robert E. Anderson Service Award in 2018, the NIAAA's Senator Harold Hughes Memorial Award in 2000, the Addiction Policy Forum Advocate of the Year Award in 2021, and the Faces & Voices of Recovery Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award in 2024.

Throughout all of this, and to those who knew her best, she remained, always, Sis - faithful, tireless, inspiring, always available, and wholly committed to the people she loved, and the people she believed needed her voice.

Mrs. Wenger is survived by her children, Brian (Kate) Wenger, Matthew Wenger, Kathryn (Pete) Paulon, and Mark Wenger; her grandchildren, Meghan (Jonathan) Deering, Daniel Wenger (Elizabeth Roeske), Patrick Wenger, Michael Wenger (Rachel French), Joseph Wenger, Elizabeth Wenger, Chelsi Spedden, Sarah Wenger, Bridget (Cal) Duckworth, Molly Paulon, Ryan Paulon, and Maggie Paulon; her great-grandchildren, Francis, Declan, and Catherine Deering, and Archie Wenger; and her brothers, Father Anthony "Tony" Gallagher and Charlie Gallagher.

She was preceded in death by her beloved husband, Donald J. Wenger; her parents, Francis and Dorothy Gallagher; her brothers, Terry, Mike, and Kevin Gallagher; and the four foster children she and Don welcomed and loved as their own.

A Funeral Mass will be celebrated Saturday, May 30, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. at Our Lady, Queen of the Most Holy Rosary Cathedral in Toledo, Ohio. Interment will follow at Calvary Cemetery, Toledo. A luncheon will be held afterward at the Toledo Club.

In lieu of flowers, the family asks that memorials be directed to the National Association for Children of Addiction at [nacoa.org/donate](http://nacoa.org/donate).

# Tribute Wall

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“ *Sis was my mentor, leader and friend in the Junior League of Birmingham. I shared co- chair in the Henry Ford Maplegrove program that she led so well.  
I will always remember and be grateful for her friendship and kindness and support. Her laugh was wonderful, positive and fun. She was one of a kind.  
I was blessed to know her.  
Sandi Wolf*

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**Sandi Wolf** - May 22 at 02:35 PM