Barbara Joanne Thornton died on August 8 in Sarasota, Florida, in the company of her devoted children. She was 90.

A woman of great intelligence and fortitude, conscience and kindness, she will be remembered as the beloved matriarch of a close-knit family, a dedicated teacher who touched many lives, and a true citizen of the world.

Born and raised in small-town Michigan, the daughter of Henry and Mary Morden James, Mrs. Thornton graduated Big Beaver High School at the age of seventeen. She went on to earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees in chemistry at Michigan State University. There she met Givens Thornton, soon to become a decorated combat officer in WWII and a professor of psychology. They married in 1947, embarking on a life of mutual devotion, teaching, service, and adventure that ended only with Prof. Thornton’s death in 2004. Mrs. Thornton taught science and mathematics at Grinnell College in the late 1950s and 1960s, and later at teacher training colleges in Uganda, U.S. military bases in Germany and Japan, and North Clarion High School in Pennsylvania. Her travels took her to all fifty states and almost a hundred countries on five continents. She was a lifelong learner and lifelong teacher in the broadest sense, and valued as both.

The state of the world was ever Mrs. Thornton’s concern, and she worked for positive change and to improve the lives of many people, both in her own community and around the globe. In Denver, she fostered a child and took an active role in Brotherhood House, an organization fostering interracial cooperation in the wake of WWII. In Grinnell, she hosted a public affairs radio show on behalf of the League of Women Voters. In Uganda, she provided support to Peace Corps volunteers. Back in the U.S., she offered her Clarion home as a safe house for battered women and an American home for international exchange students. And in Sarasota, now in her 70s and 80s, she served on the board of her retirement community, spoke out in public meetings against development projects harmful to the environment, participated in her local Planned Parenthood and Democratic Party affairs, contributed frequent letters to the editor, and tutored a non-native speaker in English. For years, she quietly supported the education of families she had met in Uganda and an AIDS orphanage in South Africa, and contributed to many charities.

Mrs. Thornton is mourned by her children, Robert of Johannesburg, South Africa; Jonathan (and Tamara) of Buffalo, NY; Wendy (and Carroll) Hunter of Sarasota; and Lucy Thornton of Johannesburg; grandchildren Colin (and Kate), Aaron (and Daleen), Julianna (and Josh), Lydia, Dora Jane, Jill (and Matt), Ryan (and Lisa), Sarah (and Jonathan), and Katie (and Jonathan); great-grandchildren Lily Barbara, Cole Givens, Kinley, Olivia, and Alexander; and friends from around the world. A memorial service will be held next summer at Kinney Cemetery, near Port Huron, Michigan. Memorial contributions may be made in her name to Doctors without Borders.