



Denise Cortis Park

October 2, 1951 - February 1, 2026

Denise Cortis Park, of Easton, Maryland, died February 1, 2026. Denise was a pioneering figure in the field of cognitive aging, a mother, sister, and a beloved grandmother.

Denise was born on October 2, 1951, in Dearborn, Michigan. She grew up in Allen Park, a suburb of Detroit, with her parents, Joe and Pauline Cortis, and five siblings. She attended local parochial schools and, in 1969, graduated from St. Frances Cabrini High School. In her first semester at Albion College, Denise became fascinated by the science of memory and the mind. After graduating a semester early, summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa, her professors encouraged her to apply to Ph.D. programs in experimental psychology. Unfortunately, those programs required application fees that were cost-prohibitive to Denise, who came from a modest background and had no savings. At the time, the State University of New York did not charge application fees, so Denise applied to several SUNY campuses and eventually enrolled in a Ph.D. program at SUNY-Albany.

At Albany, she worked tirelessly to complete her Ph.D., doing so in just three years. (She would sometimes note that it was really less than three years, because she spent summers back home in Detroit, earning money as a typist -- among her many talents was an ability to type 110 words per minute.) In 1977, at age 25, she moved south and began work as an assistant professor

at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. In 1979, she gave birth to her son, Rob; a daughter, Colleen, came the following year. (Denise was married to the children's father, William Brian Park, for 18 years.) By the spring of 1980, the 28-year-old Denise had a Ph.D., two children, and was well on her way to becoming a tenured professor, though she would have to wait until 1983 (and age 31) for that honor.

In 1985, she joined the faculty of the University of Georgia, where she established a research center and laboratory and was an associate professor in the psychology department. After ten years at Georgia, she was recruited to the University of Michigan, where she was a Professor of Psychology and Research Scientist.

Denise left Ann Arbor in 2002 to establish a new lab at the Beckman Institute at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In 2008, Denise moved to the University of Texas at Dallas, where she held the University Distinguished Chair in Behavioral and Brain Sciences and founded the Center for Vital Longevity. She was also an Adjunct Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Texas-Southwestern Medical School.

Denise's research sought to understand how the brain develops and changes throughout life, and to identify ways to maintain cognitive health into old age. She was one of the world's leading experts in the science of cognitive aging. She received awards for outstanding research from the University of Georgia, University of Michigan, the National Institutes of Health, the Association for Psychological Science, and American Psychological Association. She was a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; served as chair of the board of scientific affairs for the American Psychological Association; and served as chair of the scientific advisory board for the Max Planck Institute for Human Development. Her curriculum vita lists hundreds of publications, including books, book chapters, monographs, and over 200

peer-reviewed journal articles. She was a mentor to dozens of graduate students who currently serve as professors and researchers at many of the world's top universities and medical schools.

Denise was a fount of ideas. In a 30-minute conversation, she could share, in rapid-fire succession, novel ideas on issues as wide-ranging as geopolitics, evolution, sex differences, finance, cognition, aging, sports, culture, travel, and -- perhaps her favorite -- shopping. Powered by Krispy Kreme donuts and Tab soda, she conducted path-breaking research, traveled the world, and raised two children. She possessed an incredible drive. When her children were growing up, she would work a full day at the office, then drive the kids to evening activities, return home (or to the office) and work deep into the night. Both children were fixtures at the University of Georgia, often setting up shop in an empty office -- and, in truth, sometimes wandering the campus -- while mom worked late. When she finally wrapped up her work, she did not go to bed. Instead, she'd open a spy novel or mystery and read it straight through, often finishing in one night. It was not clear that she ever sat down to eat -- meals often came from a vending machine or the Hardee's drive-through -- and it's difficult to remember her sleeping much at all. She would say that she lived in "dog years," squeezing seven years of work and play into each year of her life.

Denise was preceded in death by her parents and two of her brothers (Gregory and Brian Cortis). She is survived by three siblings: Jeannie Gaylor of Denton, MD; Janice Cortis of Salisbury, MD; and Arthur Cortis of Trappe, MD. She is also survived by her two children: Colleen Park of Cambridge, MD, and Rob Park of Washington, DC, as well as Rob's wife, Anna Park, and their children, Henry, Julia, and Elizabeth Park.

She adored the grandchildren and, in recent years, would use her

extraordinary determination to attend their concerts and swim meets. As her condition worsened, it became increasingly difficult for her to get in and out of cars and wheelchairs to visit family or attend the grandkids' events. But "Didi," as the grandchildren knew her, would do anything to see them, even in her final days dead-panning that she was "not sure I can make the swim meet this weekend."

She often recounted her father's advice: "No prize for second best." This was how she lived her life -- whether it was research, sports, travel, or shopping, she demanded the best from herself and others. Family and friends will miss her humor, her generosity, and her incredible will.

The family wishes to express its thanks to Barbara Brice and Debbie Reed for helping to take care of Denise in recent years. They exhibited extraordinary compassion and grace in helping Denise continue to live independently despite her severe physical challenges. Donations may be made to the Denise C. Park Research Excellence & Innovation fund at the Center for Vital Longevity: <https://www.cvl.utdallas.edu/giving/>

Previous Events

Memorial Gathering

FEB 7. 11:00 AM - 1:00 PM (ET)

Fellows, Helfenbein & Newnam Funeral Home
200 S. Harrison Street
EASTON
EASTON, MD 21601

Tribute Wall

WR

“ I am saddened to have learned this news...I met Denise when I was a student at Georgia Tech and later she recruited me to join the faculty at UGA. She was a mentor to me early in my career and became a good friend. Condolences to her family....with sadness and fond memories, Wendy Rogers

Wendy Rogers - February 21 at 12:19 PM

KJ

“ Rob, Colleen and family,
I am so sorry to learn of Denise's passing. What a wonderful tribute you have written about her. We became the best of friends shortly we arrived at Albion. I have so many memories of our adventures over the next four years. Also, I am so glad we were able to get together in Dallas four years ago when she was honored for her amazing work. She was a great person and friend and I will miss her.

Karen Jackson - February 17 at 10:51 AM

AW

“ Colleen and Rob, I was so very sad to receive the news of Denise's death. Like a father's loss of a child a professor's loss of a favorite student is equally devastating. I will treasure your Mom's friendship, revere her incredible career and mourn with you her loss. I will cherish the memories of her over the years but never more than those when she first captured my eye with her intellect and her unbridled thirst for understanding and knowledge. I have several funny and interesting stories I can share if you contact me at addisonwoodward@sbcglobal.net.

Addison Woodward - February 14 at 03:04 PM

NB

“ I am an Albion College friend of Denise’s. We spent a semester in Germany together and toured Europe in our junior year. That was such a wonderful experience. She had so many great ideas about where we should go. It is still one of the outstanding experiences of my life, made more outstanding by her. During the 5 weeks we spent touring Europe with our Eurail passes and Europe on \$5/day book, we were almost never apart and came home as great friends. I always meant to get back in touch with her and am so sad to know it is too late.

Nancy Boynton - February 14 at 01:57 PM

LC

“ Li-hung C. planted a grove of 3 [Memorial Trees](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Denise Cortis Park.

Li-hung C. - February 09 at 11:40 PM

MC

“ Micaela C. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Denise Cortis Park.

Micaela C. - February 07 at 04:09 AM

ZE

“ Zdenka Milic Kavcic From Slovenia, EU lit a candle in memory of Denise Cortis Park



Zdenka Milic Kavcic from Slovenia, EU - February 06 at 01:23 PM

GB

“ Gerard B. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Denise Cortis Park.

Gerard B. - February 05 at 02:23 PM



“ Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum was purchased for the family of Denise Cortis Park.



February 04 at 03:08 PM

MF

“ Monica Fabiani Gabriele Gratton & family planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Denise Cortis Park.

Monica Fabiani Gabriele Gratton & family - February 04 at 03:08 PM

TS

“ Colleen, Rob and families we are so sad to hear about the passing of your Mom; please know that our thoughts and prayers are with each of you during this tragic loss to your families. May she Rest In Peace now The Shaw Families Canada



Tracy Shaw - February 04 at 05:51 AM

DR

“ *Deborah A. Reed lit a candle in memory of Denise Cortis Park*



Deborah A. Reed - February 03 at 07:52 PM

BF

“ *Baumgartner, Skrbina & Stolp Families planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Denise Cortis Park.*

Baumgartner, Skrbina & Stolp Families - February 03 at 07:50 PM



“ *Fairest of All was purchased for the family of Denise Cortis Park.*



February 03 at 07:50 PM



“ *Sweet Tranquility Basket was purchased for the family of Denise Cortis Park.*



February 03 at 07:28 PM

BF

“ Barbara, Gregory and families planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Denise Cortis Park.

Barbara, Gregory and families - February 03 at 07:28 PM



“ Florist Choice Bouquet was purchased for the family of Denise Cortis Park.



February 03 at 06:47 PM



“ Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum was purchased for the family of Denise Cortis Park.



February 03 at 04:17 PM