



Denise Kathleen Riley

January 21, 1947 - September 12, 2026

Denise Kathleen Perry Riley, a longtime Star Democrat editor and journalist of 40 years, died on Saturday, September 12, 2026, at Bayleigh Chase, a care facility in Easton, Md. She was 79.

She was born in Sevierville, Tenn., on January 21, 1947, to Elizabeth Haden Perry and William Arthur Perry, who was attending college there on the GI Bill.

At age 11, Denise's young life was marked by the death of her mother in 1958. For the next two years, she lived with her maternal grandparents in Ebensburg, Pa., surrounded by loving aunts, uncles and cousins. Denise then returned to Easton, where she spent the rest of her life.

Denise graduated from Easton High School in 1965. She went on to attend the University of Maryland, where she graduated in 1969 with a Bachelor of Science degree in business and public administration and a major in journalism. In the summers, she worked in the Composition Department at The Star Democrat and at university, she was a reporter on the daily student newspaper, The Diamondback.

Upon graduation, she became news editor at The Record Observer, a weekly newspaper serving Queen Anne's County, followed by a stint as acting editor of The Chester River Press, a small weekly in Chestertown. In the summer of

1970, she was promoted to editor at The Record Observer and continued in that post until May 1973, when she became news editor at The Star Democrat. In 1982, she was promoted to editor. She was the first woman named editor in the then 200-year history of The Star Democrat. She also was the first woman to win the John Hay Whitney Fellowship, which took her to Paris, France, to work on the copy desk of the International Herald Tribune from 1986 to 1987.

During her tenure with The Star Democrat, the newspaper grew from a five-day daily to six days with the addition of a Sunday edition. Circulation grew to nearly 20,000 daily subscribers. She trained hundreds of young reporters and editors. Many staffers went on to jobs at major dailies such as, The Washington Post, The Baltimore Sun and the Miami Herald. She also guided the newspaper into the digital age with the addition of a web site. Eventually, she was named executive editor with duties including overseeing The Record-Observer, The Bay Times, The Times-Record and The Dorchester Star, weeklies affiliated with The Star Democrat.

Denise was executive editor until the spring of 2010 when her health declined. In 2011, she was named editor emeritus of The Star Democrat and began writing a weekly column. During her career, she received numerous awards from the Maryland-Delaware-D.C. Press Association and the Associated Press.

For several years, she chaired the William A. Perry Scholarship Committee of the Waterfowl Festival. She also served two terms on the Waterfowl Festival Board of Directors. In 2002, she received the Calibre Certificate of Recognition for Valuable Contribution to Public Mental Health. It was presented by the Mid Shore Mental Health Association. In 2004, she was named to the Talbot County Hall of Fame for American Association of University Women. In October 2006, she was named Talbot County

Businesswoman of the Year by the Talbot County Chamber of Commerce.

In 2007, she was named to Maryland's Top 100 Women by The Maryland Daily Record in Baltimore. In July 2014, she was inducted into the Maryland-Delaware-D.C. Press Association Hall of Fame. In 2016, the Girl Scouts of the Chesapeake Bay selected Denise as the Mid-Shore Woman of Distinction for making a difference.

Denise married William J. Riley in Chestertown on May 29, 1990. Bill died in 2019.

Denise is survived by two brothers, Bruce Haden Perry and his wife, Louise, of Easton, and Bruce Edward Perry and his wife, Patricia, of Germantown; brothers-in-law, William Jackson and Tyler Whiteley Sr., both of Easton; seven nieces, Katherine Perry Ewers (Tripp Ewers), Caroline Haden Perry Spurry (Steve Spurry), Colin Denise Perry (Wayne Bryan), Amber Perry, Courtney Jackson Moore, Faith Whiteley Adams (Nolan Adams) and Kamryn Whiteley; three nephews, Joshua Perry (Courtney Perry), Tyler Whiteley Jr. and Brady Jackson; and eight great-nephews and 11 great-nieces.

She also is survived by devoted friends, many from her time at The Star Democrat.

Denise is preceded in death by her grandparents, Sarah Elizabeth Smith Perry and Charles Arthur Perry, and Mary and William Haden, who all helped to raise her; her mother and father, and stepmother, Elizabeth Rice Perry; a brother, William Austin "Bill" Perry; two sisters, Debra Perry Jackson and Kimberly Perry Whiteley. Denise dearly loved her younger siblings, Bill, Debbye and Kim and was broken-hearted when they passed away.

Visitation will be held from 5 to 8 p.m. on Thursday, September 24, at Fellows, Helfenbein and Newman Funeral Home, 200 South Harrison Street, Easton, Md.

The funeral service will be held at 11 a.m. on Friday, September 25, at St. Mark's United Methodist Church, 100 Peachblossom Road, Easton, Md. A reception will follow in the Fellowship Hall.

Denise will be inurned with her husband at the Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery in Beulah.

The family asks that donations be made to Channel Marker, 8865 Glebe Park Drive, Easton, Md., 21601; or to Talbot Hospice, 586 Cynwood Drive, Easton, Md. 21601.

Cemetery Details

Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery

Hurlock, MD

Upcoming Events

Visitation

SEP **24.** 5:00 PM - 8:00 PM (est)

Easton Location
200 S Harrison St
Easton, MD 21601
(410) 822-3131
info@fhfuneralhome.com

Memorial Service

SEP **25.** 11:00 AM (est)

St. Mark's United Methodist Church
100 Peachblossom Rd.
Easton, MD 21601
(410) 822-0001

Tribute Wall

JS

“ *Jeanne M Smith lit a candle in memory of Denise Kathleen Riley*



jeanne m smith - 5 hours ago

EM

“ *What an incredibly virtuous woman !
I will miss you my friend ~ ☺ox*



Emily Capel Meintzer

Emily Capel Meintzer - Yesterday at 07:34 PM

AM

“ *She was a wonderful woman. I worked there from 1984-1994 and she always was friendly and very respected. Slept well my friend.*

Andrea Medved Marchbanks - Yesterday at 05:25 PM

PF

“ *Our deepest condolences to Denise's family and friends. She was an inspiration to many.*

Ed and Penny Finkner

Penny Finkner - Yesterday at 01:33 PM

PC

“ *Paula Cunningham-Schoon lit a candle in memory of Denise Kathleen Riley*



Paula Cunningham-Schoon - Yesterday at 11:35 AM

FG

“ *Faye Gadow lit a candle in memory of Denise Kathleen Riley*



Faye Gadow - Yesterday at 10:59 AM

PW

“ *Denise was a tough editor and a true community leader whom I respected immensely. Her mark on this region is strong. We shall not see her likes again. May you rest now in peace, my friend.*



Patti Willis - Yesterday at 09:37 AM

ML

“ *Mary F Lynch lit a candle in memory of Denise Kathleen Riley*



Mary F Lynch - September 15 at 10:53 PM



Always so nice enjoyed working with her at the Paper years ago RIP dear Denise Fran Lynch

Fran Davis Lynch - September 15 at 10:55 PM

SS

“ *Our heartfelt condolences to Bruce and Louise! Denise was such a lovely lady with her memories and articles from the past posted in the Star Democrat! We shall always keep her in our hearts! Sally and Andy Smith*

sally Smith - September 15 at 04:02 PM