

Farewell to Joyce Tarnow

Force of Nature and a Force for Good

BY LEON KOLANKIEWICZ

Tenacious, long-time pro-choice, population, environmental, and immigration activist Joyce Tarnow has left us after succumbing at last in a no-holds-barred struggle with brain cancer. She passed away peacefully February 21, 2014, at her home, an old, remodeled cottage in Dixie County, not far from Gainesville, Florida. At her side was her loving and devoted daughter Collette Ide.

Joyce was a healthy, fit 74, and might have graced this Earth she loved so much for years to come had she not been blindsided with a brain tumor in 2011. At that time she was given what amounted to a virtual death sentence — five months to live — but dogged fighter that she is, Joyce managed to hold the Grim Reaper and his scythe at bay for another two years over and above those five months. In that remaining time, she lived life to the fullest — connecting with family and friends, exploring northern Florida’s rivers by kayak, especially the picturesque Suwannee, enjoying the state’s beautiful birdlife, protesting immigration amnesty, and even helping found a brand new organization, Scientists and Environmentalists for Population Stabilization (SEPS), for which she served as treasurer right up until her death.

It is rare indeed to find someone of Joyce’s unflagging commitment, energy, enthusiasm, zest for life, upbeat spirit, and unflinching courage. She was not one in a million, but one in a hundred million.

She was born Joyce Pedjas in Chicago, Illinois and raised there in a progressive family; her father Ronald was a member of the American Bakers’ and Confectioners Union. Incredibly, she did not have a formal education beyond high school, but given her intelligence and drive, she didn’t let this mere formality hold her back. As Prof. Stuart Hurlbert, Professor Emeritus of Biology

at San Diego State University and president of SEPS, observed recently:

...[Joyce] was pleased to be the second person I invited to help form a SEPS board. At one point, as more people were enlisted for our boards, she expressed her delight at being included with all these smart Ph.D.s. It was a bit cute and funny because, as an environmentalist, she was so much more accomplished than us Ph.D.s. And, as we all well know, there are plenty of not-so-smart Ph.D.s and plenty of them who are working to censor and suppress on our issues.



Joyce Tarnow

Joyce moved to her cherished Florida in 1962 when her children were still small and the state was far less crowded than today — Florida then had a population of “just” eight million (today it is pushing 20 million and has surpassed New York for the dubious distinction of third-most populous state). The Tarnow family lived in Pompano Beach in South Florida for a

number of years, and Joyce was active in the Unitarian Church.

Many of us in the trenches of America’s interminable and intense immigration battles catch so much flak from the media and our adversaries that we wish we had flak jackets, at least figuratively. Joyce is one of the few of us who actually had to wear the real thing at one time for her own protection, because she was on the front line, or fault line, of yet another population-related issue, and perhaps the only other dispute in contemporary America that is even more emotionally fraught and explosive than immigration — abortion.

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In 1976, Joyce opened the Women's Clinic in Fort Lauderdale. It furnished comprehensive gynecological services to poorer women who could not usually afford such medical care. It also provided safe, legal abortions. According to a 2004 article in a Palm Beach newspaper entitled "Adios, Abortionist," written when Joyce was about to close up shop and retire, the clinic performed some 800-900 abortions annually. "Fertility is an environmental issue," Joyce was quoted in the article, quite sensibly and accurately.

Joyce stuck to her guns in standing up for a woman's right to choose, even, and perhaps especially, once she was threatened. But by 2004, after 28 years, she'd had enough. According to the article:

"I'm ready to hang it up," the feisty 65-year-old says. Over the years, BBs, red paint, motor oil, and piña colada mix are just a few of the items that have been flung at her windows. She has, at times, worn a flak jacket to work, and her name made the Nuremberg files, an infamous aggregation (some consider it a hit list for anti-abortion activists) of "every person working in the baby slaughter business."

Rabbi Barry Silver, a Boca Raton-based attorney, collaborated with Joyce to win a permanent injunction against the anti-choice activist organization Operation Rescue, which had blockaded her clinic in the 1980s. "She's one of the unsung heroes," said Silver in 2004. Operation Rescue was forced to pay \$235,000 in legal fees. "We bankrupted them. Joyce was instrumental in that victory."

Like many, Joyce was galvanized by concerns about overpopulation thanks to *The Population Bomb*, published in 1968. And at a 1970 Earth Day event, as she later told a newspaper reporter:

I saw a table set up by the engineering department that showed the population bomb. There was this beautiful baby picture and a display of the number of U.S. births indicated by a strobe light flashing — it was a real attention grabber. I'd been living in Florida since 1962, and I was impressed by the marine life here, the trees and foliage, and it seemed people didn't realize the potential impact of rapid population growth.

Joyce was so inspired that she went on to start the Miami chapter of the new group Zero Population Growth (ZPG) in 1970. This organization had been founded by biologists Paul Ehrlich, Charles Remington, and others just two years earlier. Joyce served on the national board of ZPG from 1972–1974.

In 1971, an aspiring wildlife biologist from the

Miami area, a mere teenager at the time who now manages a national wildlife refuge in California, met Joyce at an Earth Day event in Key Biscayne, Florida. He remembers her as a "tall, gorgeous blonde" who gave him ZPG literature while pressuring him vigorously to join. "Joyce did not evolve into 'warrior mode' gradually like most of us; she seems to have been born with spear and shield in hand," wrote Stu Hurlbert recently.

Joyce personified the René Dubos dictum of "thinking globally and acting locally;" she was the very embodiment of citizen activist. To those chummy, clubby, comfortable, complacent, and corrupt "old boy" bureaucrats and politicians who wielded power over our communities and our lives — Joyce could be an insufferable, pestering gadfly. One irreverent newspaper columnist referred to her as "an interminably irritating presence at Pompano Beach City Commission meetings." What a badge of honor! Joyce was no wallflower or shrinking violet.

Even as she worked on the global, national, and intimately personal issues of fertility and population, she began getting involved in statewide and local environmental and land use issues, a pattern which continued for the rest of her life.

In 1974, Joyce was living in Gables-by-the-Sea just north of the Turkey Point Nuclear Power Plant, which had recently begun operations. She led the Coral Bay Civic Association in challenging the issuance of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit to a developer who sought to deposit fill in Biscayne Bay to build more houses. There were dolphins in the bay and nesting bald eagles, then a highly threatened species as a result of habitat loss and thinning of eggshells from insecticide contamination. South Florida and this area in particular had been rapidly filling up with people and houses in recent decades, and it was time to draw a line in the sand. Eventually, Congressman Dante Fascell intervened and the Corps rejected the permit application. "Dante was one of the best," recalled Joyce.

Joyce's obituary in the *Florida Sun-Sentinel* provided numerous other examples of her local activism. In the late 1990s, her efforts resulted in Pompano Beach building a water treatment plant so it could pump more water from its western wells, reduce pumping from its eastern wells, and install a system that would monitor saltwater moving inland. (Saltwater penetration of freshwater aquifers is a problem confronting many rapidly growing or densely populated coastal urban areas.) "If you can't supply the water, you shouldn't be going forward with more growth," Joyce said at the time.

At one point, she advocated a criminal investigation into what one newspaper reporter described as Pompano Beach's "corrupt" water department.

Joyce created the McNab Road Coalition to stop a



(Upper Left) Joyce and a friend at a recent environmental event; (Upper Right) Joyce as a pro-choice protestor; (Below) Joyce Tarnow on the front line of the nation's immigration wars, as a counter-protester being confronted by angry protestors in a rally on the National Mall in Washington, DC, April 2013.



road expansion project near her Pompano Beach home. The coalition later became the South Pompano Civic Association. “She did her homework and people listened to her and believed her because she was right,” said attorney Ross Shulmister, who worked with Joyce on the McNab Road Coalition.

She fought high-rise development projects in Pompano Beach, especially those planned for the beachfront. In 2001, she told the city commissioners:

Are you so intoxicated by the growth virus ... you can close your eyes [to quality of life issues]? Are you puppets of big-shot developers? ... I hope an angry citizenry will rise up and send you packing.

Shortly therefore, Joyce decided to do just that. She mounted a recall petition to remove the mayor and vice-mayor of Pompano Beach; unfortunately it was unsuccessful.

Upon learning of her death, Pompano Beach Commissioner Rex Hardin told an interviewer: “I know she was tenacious in her support of her beliefs....she wanted the best for the city and she let her opinions be known.”

After Joyce moved to Cross City in northern Florida in 2007, she continued her local activism, fighting an incinerator plan, continuing to work on water issues and lobbying politicians with letters.

Joyce also got involved in the non-partisan, grassroots Florida Hometown Democracy movement, or Amendment 4, spearheaded by local growth control activist Ross Burnaman and environmental attorney Lesley Blackner. This amendment appeared on the statewide ballot in November 2010. After heavy spending against it by pro-development interests — helped by the downturn in construction because of the Great Recession — Florida voters defeated Amendment 4 by 67-33 percent (2 to 1). But even this lopsided margin means millions of Floridians are fed up with business-as-usual and cozy ties between developers and politicians. If it had passed, this measure would have amended the Florida Constitution to require local referenda on certain changes to municipalities’ master land-use and growth-management plans; it was meant to give citizens a greater voice on decisions affecting their communities’ futures. And it was hoped that it might rein in Florida’s pell-mell growth that is compromising the environment and quality of life for everyone. But Florida’s economy and residents are even more addicted to unsustainable growth than most, even more beholden to developers and the growth juggernaut, and the outcome reflected this.

While campaigning to put Amendment 4 on the ballot, Joyce once stood outside a Publix supermarket collecting signatures. Publix called the Broward’s County Sheriff’s Office, who ordered her to leave. Joyce refused, saying “it’s anti-democratic,” and the sheriffs

arrested her on a misdemeanor trespassing charge. She spent almost two days in jail.

In 1994, Joyce co-founded Floridians for a Sustainable Population (FSP), one of only three state-based population organizations in the country (the others being in California and Vermont). She served as president of FSP from 1996 up until her death, as well as running its website. In 2000 she commissioned NumbersUSA founder Roy Beck and me to conduct one of our sprawl studies on Florida to coincide with Florida Overpopulation Awareness Week. Analyzing 40 years of U.S. Census Bureau data on Urbanized Areas, our report “Overpopulation = Sprawl in Florida” found that almost all of the farmland, beach, and habitat-devouring urban sprawl in Florida was related to population growth. As the report stated:

Florida’s phenomenal population growth has been the No. 1 factor in the state’s urban sprawl. The supposedly gluttonous appetite of Florida’s citizens for more and more urban space per resident has in fact played little role in the sprawl. In most Urbanized Areas, the amount of land per resident did not grow at all and, thus, growth in per capita [land] consumption was not a factor in any of the sprawl in those cities.

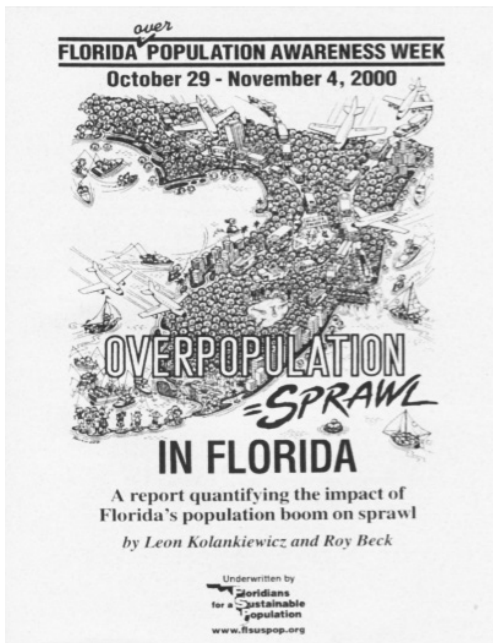
Upon her passing, FSP paid Joyce this tribute:

Joyce was...a tireless worker for clean water, clean air, wise land use, and Florida’s quality of life. She joined the fray against a jetport in Miami, the Cross-Florida Barge Canal, and sprawling growth every place she lived. There isn’t a corner of Florida that hasn’t benefited from her efforts. Her steadiest of visions focused on a recognition of the arithmetic simplicity that population growth on Earth had finally exceeded sustainable limits, threatening the very life-support systems making the planet habitable for humans and other living creatures. Joyce travelled the world, hiking, scuba diving, birding, and giving testament to the core truth of overpopulation lying at the heart of so many of humanity’s global and local problems.... We all miss Joyce terribly.

For a number of years, I would see Joyce many autumns at the Writers Workshops organized by the Social Contract Press. But it was more fun to see Joyce in her own element — in her native Florida habitat. In late 2001, I traveled to Miami on behalf of NumbersUSA to participate in a panel discussion at the University of Miami in Coral Gables. This forum on post-9-11 immigration and national security issues was organized by

the South Florida Chapter of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. Joyce picked me up at the airport. After my commitment, we got to spend a day together with the alligators and birds in Florida’s legendary but beleaguered Everglades. We went bird-watching and for a noisy but entertaining airboat ride from Alligator Alley across the glades of sawgrass. It was a joy to see Joyce out in the nature she lived for, and it will remain my fondest memory of her.

As a feisty and fearless veteran of America’s abor-



tion wars, Joyce did not hesitate to volunteer for the front lines in America’s immigration wars in her later years. She was outspoken and had a take-no-prisoners, hardcore-realistic take on demographic issues redolent of Garrett Hardin’s discussions of lifeboat ethics and triage. She was every bleeding heart’s *bête-noire*. Asked once by a reporter about illegal immigration from Haiti, Joyce replied that the United States:

...can’t take all the people in the world. We need to help nations that can subsist and let other wither on the vine. [Haiti] has denuded the whole land. Stew in your own juices.

Perhaps a slightly more sensitive expression of the same idea would have been, “you made your own bed, now sleep in it,” but Joyce wasn’t into Kumbaya sensitivity sessions. She told hard, unvarnished, uncomfortable truths, and had a “Damn the Torpedoes!” attitude to how they were received or what people thought of her. One of these truths is that each person, each family, each community, and each country is ultimately responsible for its own wellbeing and demographic destiny. “It takes a village” impulses notwithstanding, well-meaning but misguided humanitarian efforts that spring only from

the heart but ignore the head and the brain can backfire, ultimately leading to greater suffering and more harm from unintended (but all too predictable) consequences over the long term.

Jonathan Porritt, former director of Friends of the Earth and former chair of the UK government’s Sustainable Development Commission, recently wrote in *The Guardian*:

25 years ago, at the time of the ‘Feed the World’ campaign, the population of Ethiopia was around 33 million. Today, it’s nearly 80 million, partly as a consequence of Western aid successfully preventing the death of millions of people who would otherwise not have survived periods of chronic drought. By 2050, on a ‘business as usual’ projection, Ethiopia’s population will be around 175 million, many of whom will be as vulnerable to serious drought as they were when we were all being exhorted ‘to feed the world’.

The unsustainability and futility of such scenarios were the essence of Joyce’s message, and as one who had the courage of her convictions, she stuck to this message whether it was ‘politically correct’ or not. Few of us can claim as much.

Florida Hometown Democracy’s Lesley Blackner, who filed a lawsuit in 1995 under the Endangered Species Act to force Volusia County to do more to protect nesting endangered sea turtles on its beaches, posted these comments about her friend Joyce:

Joyce was an absolutely unique person. She had an amazing capacity to preserve and push for what she believed in: women’s rights; the rights of non-human species to space on this planet; the beauty and necessity of nature; the importance of stabilizing human population growth. She was at the vanguard of these efforts and did not shrink. Threats, arrest, defamation — she was unstoppable. We need more people like you Joyce. You are greatly admired and you will be greatly missed.

Lesley wrote me during Joyce’s final days that:

When I first saw Joyce after her initial diagnosis, she told me she would be happy to have ‘a few more years.’ And she did. She also told me that we are here for a short time and must be mindful of time passing...and that we are merely stewards, not owners...of the planet.

Thank you, Joyce, for being a good steward of Mother Earth and for urging your fellow Americans to aim for the same. ■