



Operavore

Published by

[Operavore](#) by [Operavore](#)

Life Lessons From June LeBell



June LeBell from the WQXR archives (WQXR)

May 1, 2017 · by Fred Plotkin

June LeBell, WQXR's first female announcer and a beloved member of the station's family, died in Sarasota, Fla. on April 30, a day after her 73rd birthday and one day before her eighth wedding anniversary with Edward Alley, a musician and arts manager whom she "treasured and adored," as she told me.

She was a proud New Yorker, born in 1944 at Knickerbocker Hospital in Harlem and raised in the city. She graduated from the High School of Music and Art in 1961 and had a full career in broadcasting, writing and performing in New York before moving to Sarasota after 9/11.

She (and Ed) fought the good fight after she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2012. They continued to live life meaningfully, full of music, good food and friends. June, through her example but also through her speaking and writing, taught many of us to savor the beauty life has to offer for whatever time we have.

June was very open about her illness. She asked me to share it [in an article](#) I wrote about her on Feb. 23, 2016. Last December she wrote, “I’ve learned a lot from this surgery and all the side effects: I adore and cherish my husband. He does so much for me and I’m so grateful. Pain really interferes with life and changes personality (I’m trying to overcome that) ... When I get my strength back, I’ll be grateful to have a body, no matter the shape. Ed and I married just 7 years ago ... We traveled, swam with dolphins and adored each other, thinking we were fine. Know what? We were. Be careful what you pray and wish for. Sometimes we have everything and don’t stop to appreciate it!”

In June’s three decades at WQXR and then during her years in Sarasota, she [lived a life](#) of speaking, teaching, broadcasting and sharing everything she loved. If you know me and my work, you realize that June and I had many overlapping passions. Some people might have behaved competitively but June was remarkably encouraging to younger people who shared her interests, showed talent, and were willing to work very hard. For many years she worked 14 hours a day, 7 days a week. She was an example of the dictum that there are no short cuts if you want to do superb work. I do my best to honor her example.

June was a remarkable interviewer whose preparation as a musician and researcher enabled her to ask questions that elicited responses both sincere and original. If she caught you off guard, it was not to make you uncomfortable but to have you say things you might not have realized you knew.

She respected all of her guests and only claimed to have been [starstruck twice](#) — with George Balanchine and Walter Cronkite. I know public figures who were starstruck upon meeting her, but she always put them at ease. Being interviewed by June meant having a conversation in which you learned from her while she let her audience learn from you.

June also understood that the arts can teach us things, through example and emotion, that more literal study might fail to reveal. On March 5, she published a review in the *Observer* of Sarasota Opera’s production of Poulenc’s *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. In the opera, the Old Prioress dies a visibly painful death, very likely of cancer. It is very difficult to watch even if you are not battling this illness, so I read June’s description with care: “Played with a startling terror of death by Lisa Chavez, her cry for Mother Marie of the Incarnation is a sure sign this is not going to be an easy death for this otherwise kind and wise Prioress who’s led the order for about a dozen years.” This was June: passionate and dispassionate at the same time.

On April 24, she posted on Facebook: "We called in Hospice. They're coming to us and they seem wonderful. Bringing a hospital bed today. They're here for both life and transition. It's time. I'll try to stay in touch and update you as much as I can. You've all been great supporters and the love and prayers have helped tremendously. I can't thank you enough! I'm hanging around a bit. Maybe. Not scared. Very calm and at peace. Love you."

When the Empire State Building was lit in blue last Dec. 3 to celebrate WQXR's 80th anniversary. June wrote "It was an honor to work for this great station for 30 years and to be its very first female staff announcer. When you're doing it, you don't think of it as historic or anything but being very fortunate to be making a career at the nation's best and best-known commercial classical station. Looking back, I'm bowled over by the memories and colleagues. I worked with the best of the best and they taught me! Duncan Pirnie, Matt Thomas, [Peter Allen](#), George Edwards, Hugh Morgan, Mel Elliot, wow! And our engineering staff, Doc, Herb, Phil, Al, Maurice. What a legacy. And, of course Bob Sherman and George Jellinek. And then Nimet and Clayelle, Candice, and Midge, who came after me. Was I ever blessed. Shine proudly blue Empire State Building for WQXR at 80."

Our light is momentarily dimmed but our memories of June LeBell will continue to burn bright. To remember June, I will listen to this performance of Brahms Lieder by Christa Ludwig and Leonard Bernstein. Her favorite, she said, was "Mainacht" ("May Night") which comes at 13:10.

Update (May 5, 2017): Memorial services for June LeBell will be held in both New York and Sarasota. The New York Service is on Saturday, May 20th at 3 pm at Marble Collegiate Church (Fifth Avenue and 20th Street). The Sarasota service is on Monday May 8th at 2 pm, and will be live-streamed by the church at churchofthepalms.org.