



## Barbara Farrington Thomas

July 25, 1931 - March 10, 2026

Barbara (Farrington) Thomas, a pioneering educator and tireless advocate for students with disabilities, passed away peacefully on March 10, 2026, at the age of 94.

Born July 25, 1931, in Dadeville, Alabama, Barbara's early life was marked by curiosity and adventure. Before turning 21, she had traveled across most of the United States and earned a scholarship to an international summer work camp in Sweden. A natural leader, she served as senior class president before graduating from Huntington College in Montgomery.

During the Korean War, she joined the American Red Cross and was stationed in Yokohama, Japan, where she met her future husband, Richard Thomas, who was serving in the U.S. Army. After beginning their family in the Bay Area, where she worked as a probation officer, the couple moved to Fresno in 1965.

Barbara soon found her life's calling in education. Beginning in 1966 as a school psychometrist and psychologist for Fresno County Schools, she traveled extensively-usually more than 100 miles a day-to serve students in

rural and mountain communities. Within a year of getting her credential as a school psychologist, she used a grant to study Spanish in Mexico to help ensure that Spanish-speaking students in Fresno County would no longer be mistakenly placed in special education.

Next, she served 12 years with Sanger Unified School District as a school psychologist and later as coordinator of psychological and special education services. She returned to Fresno County Schools (under Superintendent Pete Mehas) as director of special education, where she oversaw 300+ personnel and coordinated services for 33 districts for nearly 15 years. Her work touched virtually every school district in the county. She also taught a graduate-level school psychology seminar at Fresno State for more than a decade.

A respected leader in her field, Barbara served as president of both the California Association of School Psychologists and the Association of California County Boards of Education. She also consulted with the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT), lending her expertise to school systems across the state.

Barbara was a fierce and effective advocate at the local, state, and national levels. She made countless trips to Sacramento and Washington, D.C., championing equitable funding for special education. Her efforts were instrumental in the passage of the Education Funding Reform Act of 1997. Prior to her retirement in 1999, she founded the Coalition for Adequate Funding for Children with Disabilities, which helped drive landmark legislation, AB 602. Her work earned numerous honors, including a State Assembly Resolution recognizing her contributions.

Even after retiring, Barbara continued to serve the community as a trustee and president of the Fresno County Board of Education for four terms. She remained a sought-after consultant, advising school districts on complex special education and funding issues, often taking calls at all hours. She was also active in civic life, including the Fresno County Democratic Women's Club, while advocating for education and social services.

Outside her professional life, Barbara was an avid traveler, exploring cities across the United States and abroad. Well into her later years, she embraced new experiences-including riding a camel and an elephant in India to commemorate her 80th birthday. She was also deeply devoted to genealogy, spending years researching family histories and connecting with relatives across the country. In her final years, despite declining vision, she began writing a personal memoir under the tutelage of her mentor, close friend, and former colleague, Armen Bacon.

Barbara was preceded by her husband, Richard Thomas, and her younger brother Fletcher Jr. She is survived by both sisters, Sue in rural Missouri and Betty in Memphis. Barbara has five children, Dan (and Mila) Thomas of Piedmont, Jim (and Yoon Hee) Thomas of Fresno, Mary (and Stephen) Veach of Fresno, Margaret (and Bill) Roberson of Turlock, and Bill Thomas of Fresno, three of whom are teachers; ten grandchildren, Michelle, Kevin, Denise, Ryan, Marcus, Aloria, Jasmine, David, Anna, and Brianna; nine great-grandchildren, Cattibrie, Mason, Ellington, Jelani, Ukweli, Bakari, Imara, Maxwell, and Juniper; and one great-great-grandchild, Cairo. Barbara's family also hosted an International Christian Youth Exchange student from Austria, Hilde Katter (deceased), who graduated from Fresno State and became a

social worker and an American citizen.

A Celebration of Life will be held on April 18 at 12:30 p.m. at Wesley United Methodist Church. In lieu of flowers, donations may be sent to Break the Barriers (Barbara's favorite non-profit) or a charity of your choice.

Barbara Thomas's legacy endures in the countless students, educators, and communities she served with unwavering dedication and compassion.

To plant trees in memory, please visit the Sympathy Store.

# Cemetery Details

## Belmont Memorial Park

Fresno, CA  
later date

# Previous Events

## Celebration of Life

APR 18. 12:30 PM (PT)

Wesley United Methodist Church  
1343 E Barstow Ave  
Fresno, CA 93710

# Tribute Wall

PF

“ Pam Noa & Family purchased the Country Basket Blooms for the family of Barbara Farrington Thomas.



---

**Pam Noa & Family** - April 17 at 07:09 PM

PB

“ Barbara was a kindred spirit. I first met her in 2008 at the Fresno County Democratic Women’s Club and NWPC Fresno. She always advocated for the power of education to overcome poverty. My parents lived in a boxcar near the railroad tracks in Barstow before they had five daughters. I was the first in my family to go to college and law school. Barbara advocated for children and women decades before I did as a Family Law Attorney. So many of us benefited from her sage advice and political acumen. Like Barbara, I had two key educational highlights—world travel and writing memoir under Armen Bacon. But Barbara was stellar and is greatly, greatly missed. Both my nieces danced at Break the Barriers, so I’m happy to make a donation In Barbara’s memory. My deepest condolences to her friends and family.

—Patricia Brown, Fresno, California

---

**Patricia Brown** - April 17 at 05:41 PM