



Yesterday, July 6, 2018, we laid to rest Mario's beloved wife and the matriarch of the Andretti family, Dee Ann. Mrs. Andretti underwent open heart surgery on June 5 to replace two valves and suffered serious complications in the weeks that followed. She passed away peacefully surrounded by family on July 2. A beautiful Mass was held at Holy Family Church in Nazareth followed by burial in the church's cemetery.

We thank friends, fans, and the racing community for the comforting words and remembrances of Dee Ann. Tributes have come in worldwide with kind posts in various forms of media. We share just one of the many stories we have read and will treasure.

## **Dee Ann Andretti: The 'solid rock' behind legendary racer Mario Andretti**

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Special to The Morning Call

In the 50-something years I have been chronicling the pursuits of three generations of Andretti race car drivers, I think I had only four meaningful conversations with Dee Ann Andretti.

That wasn't because my readers and I wouldn't have benefited from what she had to say.

Dee Ann Andretti, who died Monday at the age of 75, was always friendly when we talked; it was just that she never cared about being in the spotlight.

If you watch an IndyCar Series race these days, you'll see drivers' wives, sometimes with infants or toddlers in their arms, waiting to give their husbands one last peck before they climb into the cockpit.

I could never envision Dee Ann and Mario taking part in that ritual.

In fact, Dee Ann not only passed on prerace festivities, she didn't concern herself with Victory Lane celebrations either.

"I can count on the fingers of one hand the amount of times she was on the podium with me," Mario told me for a Mother's Day feature about Dee Ann five years ago, "not because she wasn't asked, but she just didn't want to bother with that.

"You do your thing,' she'd say. She wanted her privacy and I always respected that."

"Wives play a tremendous role in this business," Mario told Morning Call colleague Kathleen Bercaw when she wrote about Dee Ann at the end of Mario's IndyCar career in 1994.

"Some people need to have their wives hanging onto their arms, but that was never us. Dee Ann doesn't have to be there handing me a towel when I get out of the car. Hers was always a quiet style -- stable. She's not doing headstands if I win or mourning if I lose. You have to have stability. She has more than contributed her share to my success."

More than once, Mario called Dee Ann "my solid rock."

"When I came out of the cockpit officially, I began to understand so much better what her concerns were on the sidelines, because that's where I was," Mario told me in 2013.

"Knowing what [sons Michael and Jeff, and, later, grandson Marco] are facing, the potential danger. I understood then what she was feeling through the many years I was driving.

"Until then, I figured, don't worry about it, I'm handling it, everything is good. All she could do was be resigned to what was gonna happen."



Dee Ann, Barbie, Jeff, Mario, and Michael (Morning Call file photo)

I once asked Dee Ann whether it was more agonizing watching her husband or her sons and grandson race.

“I think Mario back in the beginning, because of the danger factor,” she said. “It’s not that it’s not dangerous today, but it’s not as bad. Then you have your kids out there. What really used to get me going was when you would have Mike and Mario on the track together and dueling, because I knew neither one would ever give an inch.”

While Mario traveled the world in the 1970s in search of a Formula One championship, which he won in 1978, or continued to work as an ambassador for the sport by keeping up a work schedule that has never seemed to slow down even now at 78, Dee Ann ran the show at home.

She didn’t always have the Villa Montona lifestyle she shared with Mario in their palatial estate near Nazareth. The couple started out married life living with her parents. There were months at a time in a trailer park in Indianapolis to be near the hub of Mario’s racing.

On July 7, 1969, Nazareth Borough Council renamed a two-block piece of Market Street as Victory Lane in honor of the Indianapolis 500 victory, and 53 Victory Lane became somewhat of a tourist drive-by attraction. The couple lived there until moving to the current residence.

That ’69 Indy victory was a nearly a game-changer for Dee Ann.

In a video biography of Mario, she said: "The year he won was eye-opening. That's when I felt, 'I don't know if I really like this,' because then I didn't have my husband anymore. He was public territory and I did not appreciate that. I ended up learning to live with it because that's part of the whole industry. But I did have a problem with that."

She never let it defeat her though.

Their only daughter, Barbie, was born the night the borough honored Mario for the Indy win and he won a race at the Nazareth National Speedway. Barbie described her mother as "loving, warm and funny.

"Mom is totally untouched by notoriety and fame," Barbie is quoted in that 1994 Morning Call story. "Through the years, her only concern was wanting to be there for all of us. I know she was hurting a lot of the time when she stayed home with us and missed some of Dad's victories. But she kept that away from us. She never wasted time being miserable. It takes a special woman to dedicate her life to helping others chase their dreams."

"Throughout everything, she let me do my thing," Mario once said. "Many times she must have been thinking, 'Why do you have to book a race every weekend? Can't we have one weekend off?' I expected to hear it over the years, but it never happened. She allowed me, in a very unselfish way, to operate at a maximum, to fulfill my dreams.

"I never had to pretend beyond what I could deliver with Dee Ann. The glitz, the success, never impressed her. She has been like a pillar that has helped me stand straight."

Dee Ann was once asked what advice she would give to wives of other race car drivers.

"Don't give advice. Everyone deals with things in their own way. The last thing anyone wants to hear is, 'Everything will be all right.'"

That was Dee Ann Hoch Andretti. A special woman with a special mission. All the way to the checkered flag.

