

Community mourns death of former Mall of Victor Valley GM Janice Olson

By [Rene Ray De La Cruz](#)

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VICTORVILLE — Many in the community are mourning the passing of Janice Olson, the former Victor Valley College Foundation president and general manager of the Mall of Victor Valley.

Olson, whose passion for lost World War II aircraft history led her into the jungles of Papua New Guinea, died Wednesday morning after a long battle with illness, according to VVC Foundation Executive Director Catherine Abbott, who spoke on behalf of the college.

Robert Olson, who lives in Orange County, said his mother was 70 years old when she passed and was very "secretive about her age." He added that she

"She was a force to be reckoned with and she was very strong willed," Robert Olson said. "She had a tremendous amount of charisma and her strong personality was perfect for helping the community."

Abbott said Janice Olson was an extraordinary woman who genuinely loved the college and the foundation, remarking that her presence was "a life force" when she visited the office or a board meetings. "Her heart was huge for our students and her adventurous spirit was infectious."

During a black-tie event earlier this year, the foundation presented Olson with the President's Award and inducted her into the VVC Alumni Hall of Fame. Olson told the audience that over the past 15 years, she spent "a lot of time with a lot of people making good things happen."

Several of those who knew Olson spoke to the Daily Press and shared their thoughts on the woman and "friend" who many said, "impacted and transformed" many lives and made "incredibly good" things happen.

Former Foundation Executive Director Ginger Ontiveros told the Daily Press that Olson was a "non-judgemental and very open-minded" woman who took a "deep interest" in everyone she met.

"She was someone you could trust and some of our brief conversations would go for two hours," said Ontiveros, who met Olson at the Mall of Victor Valley and invited her to participate in the foundation. "A conversation with her was like an escape from reality — in a good way. She was was an intriguing individual who challenged and inspired me and many others."

Olson broke many glass ceilings, including becoming the first female department head at Homart Development Co, a development arm of Sears Roebuck, a VVC Foundation news release said.

Throughout her time at VVC, Olson was known for her passion and heart for students, and always was actively involved in mentoring and connecting with students.

Her passion for education and people included supporting the Model United Nations team and advocating for education programs on campus.

Foundation Board President Eric Schmidt said Olson was was instrumental in leading the transition of the aviation program from the Victor Valley Aviation Education Consortium to the college.

"She was an avid supporter of education in our community and she had a significant impact in VVC's philanthropic pursuits and the foundation of the college," Schmidt said. "Our connection was through aerospace and she was a passionate addict of everything aerospace and aviation."

Schmidt said Olson was a WWII history enthusiast and who loved researching aircraft and the servicemen who were lost in the Pacific and had not been discovered.

Ontiveros said Olson was an expert on the B-17 Flying Fortress in the Pacific Theatre and she researched the history of downed airmen and aircraft in order to reunite families with the legacy of their lost loved ones.

"Janice traveled to Papua New Guinea multiple times to locate downed aircraft," Ontiveros said. "Her journey through the jungle also earned her the respect and love of the tribal people."

Ontiveros said she still remembers photos of Janice standing in the middle of a jungle and looking "very aviator and adventure-looking" as she wore cargo pants and other trekking gear.

Olson's passion for WWII history may have come from her father, Col. Charles "Chick" Olson, who was a 5th Bomber Command B-17 Flying Fortress pilot.

"He never talked about his wartime experiences," said Olson, during an interview with Pacific Flyer. "I knew he was a pilot because I'd flown with him as a child, but it was only after his death in 1988 that I found out he flew B-17s in the South Pacific."

Olson's search and discovery of WWII aircraft was featured in Lawrence J. Hickey's book "Ken's Men Against the Empire Vol. I," which is available online.

Robert Olson said his mother was a "real-life Indiana Jones" because of her passion for history and her many treks around the world.

Olson was also a notable speaker at women's history events that inspired and empowered future women leaders. She also maintained strong ties to the community through her roles at the Victor Valley Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors and the Victor Valley Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs.

VVC Board of Trustees member Joseph W. Brady said he met Olson over 25 years ago and had regular breakfast meetings with her at Molly Brown's in Victorville.

"Janice was a major thinker who had big ideas and was a producer who did incredibly well," Brady said. "She loved her military aircraft, but she also loved the Victor Valley, the college and the foundation."

Brady said Olson's love for planes is what got VVC's aviation program off the ground, adding that "everyone who ever goes through that program should be grateful for her tenacity."

According to Brady, Olson was also instrumental in the opening of the Moreno Valley Mall and was an incredible manager of the Victor Valley Mall, remarking that she had a real-world look at retail and consumers, and understood how the mall worked.

"Janice was a joy to my life and she blazed a trail as a woman for so many. Her life made my success easier," Ontiveros said. "It's hard to think of a world without her."

Services for Olson will be held sometime in December at Sunset Hills Mortuary in Apple Valley.

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