



## Laura Jean Elizabeth Lee

October 8, 1982 - February 24, 2016

Laura Jean Elizabeth Lee, age 33, a pioneer in inclusive education and an advocate for people with disabilities, passed away peacefully in her sleep on February 24, 2016 at her home in Oakton, Virginia.

In 1982, seven years after the passage of IDEA, the civil rights law that guaranteed education for students with disabilities, Laura was born with Down syndrome and a severe heart defect. She was not expected to live. Laura exceeded all expectations and went on to make a difference in the world in ways that others can only hope to achieve. Laura touched the lives of everyone she met, and her life had an impact on countless others in ways that will continue long into the future.

Laura participated in disability advocacy efforts on the local, state, and national levels since she was a young child. She met and influenced policy makers from both sides of the aisle in the Virginia General Assembly, U.S. House of Representatives, U.S. Senate, as well as in the White House with Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. She was the first person with Down syndrome to testify before the Fairfax County School Board, Virginia Board of Education, Virginia General Assembly committees, a U. S. Congressional committee, and a U.S. Department of Education hearing. Laura also spoke at many state and national conferences.

For many youth and adults with disabilities and their families, Laura was the first advocate with a significant disability that many had seen give a presentation. When she advocated for improved policies, or spoke about her college experience, living in a townhouse with roommates, and taking a bus and the subway to her paid job at the World Bank, she helped them visualize a better future and understand the difference they could make in their own lives and the lives of others. Laura's determination opened the door for so many who followed her lead.

Laura was instrumental in the development of inclusive education and was one of the first six students to attend the Options Program at Paul VI High School in Fairfax, Virginia in 1998. Paul VI was the second high school in the country to include students with intellectual disability. There are now almost 100 inclusive Catholic schools in the U.S. Paul VI has acknowledged that without the dedication of Laura and her parents, PVI Options would not exist. As one representative of the school stated, "Laura was the matriarch of the Options program."

Laura also helped blaze a trail in inclusive postsecondary education and in 2002 was the first of three students accepted into George Mason University's LIFE Program, the first university program of its kind for students with intellectual disability. There are now approximately 6,500 individuals enrolled in over 250 programs across the country. Think College, a national organization dedicated to developing, expanding, and improving these postsecondary programs, has pledged to honor Laura's life and contributions by continuing to make the college dreams of people with intellectual disability a reality for generations to come. So many opportunities currently exist and will be developed in the future because of the barriers broken by Laura.

Laura was a woman with diverse interests and talents. She was a committed volunteer at Food for Others. She enjoyed traveling to many places, including

the Galapagos Islands, Mexico, Alaska and Hawaii. She was brave and adventurous, trying new activities such as skiing and snowmobiling. Laura participated in painting and drawing classes, dance, water aerobics, Pilates, Special Olympics, and enjoyed working out at the gym. She also loved singing, celebrating others and offering toasts. Laura was a member of the Vienna Presbyterian Church, the National Down Syndrome Congress, the National Down Syndrome Society, and the Lee Family Association of Washington, DC, the local chapter of the Lee On Dong Association, USA, which serves the needs of the local Chinese American community.

When asked to describe Laura, people always mention her smile, which captured her lovely spirit. They also note that she was considerate, compassionate, empathetic, and loving. Laura was a keen observer with a calm and quiet presence, but she was also persistent, determined, and known for her joy, spunk and unique sense of style.

Laura is survived by her parents, Gen Lai Chin Lee and Stephanie Smith Lee, siblings, Sherri Chin (Jonathan Chew), and Andrew Lee (Rachel Korpan Lee), niece and nephews, Sabrina Chew, Jacob Lee and Nicholas Lee, and grandfather Menlo F. Smith (Kathryn). She is also survived by many loving aunts, uncles, and cousins, and Lita Maria Ocampo, who loved and supported Laura throughout her life. Laura is pre-deceased by grandparents Mary Jean Jacobson Smith, Kung Sung Chin Lee, and Tom Sun How.

Visitation will be held at Fairfax Memorial Funeral Home on Friday, March 18, 2016 from 5-8pm. Funeral Services will be held at Vienna Presbyterian Church on Saturday, March 19, 2016 at 1:00 pm, followed by a reception. Services and burial will take place at Bellerive Gardens Cemetery in St. Louis, Missouri at 11 am on Saturday, March 26, 2016.

Donations may be made to either of the Laura Jean Elizabeth Lee memorial funds benefiting students in the two inclusive educational programs Laura was instrumental in creating and that meant so much to her. Instructions for making donations are below.

Laura Jean Elizabeth Lee Mason LIFE Memorial Fund.

Checks should be made out to: George Mason University Foundation.  
In the "memo" line of the check, write: Laura Jean Elizabeth Lee Mason LIFE Memorial Fund.

Checks should be mailed to: GMU Foundation, Inc., 400 University Drive, MSN 1A3, Fairfax, VA 22030.

Online donations may be made through [fasterfarther.gmu.edu](https://fasterfarther.gmu.edu).

Click on the "GIVE" tab at the top of the page.

In the text box next to the words "If 'Other,' indicate fund here" type in: Laura Jean Elizabeth Lee Mason LIFE Memorial Fund.

Complete the remaining required fields and submit.

Laura Jean Elizabeth Lee Paul VI Catholic High School Options Memorial Scholarship Fund

Checks should be made out to Paul VI Catholic High School.

On the memo line, write Laura J. E. Lee Options Scholarship Fund.

Checks should be mailed to: Paul VI Catholic High School, Attn: Advancement, 10675 Fairfax Boulevard, Fairfax, VA 22030.

Online donations may be made through <https://www.paulvi.net/donate>.

Under "Designation" choose, "Memorial Gift" from the drop down menu.

Click on "Add Donation."

The following screen will have an "Additional Information" section with a

comment box. In the comment box please type: Laura J. E. Lee Options Scholarship Fund.

To learn more about Laura, see the following:

Washington Post 1993 article about Laura's key role in improving educational opportunities for students with intellectual disability (ID) in Virginia:

<http://wapo.st/1RgMMqa>

Education Week 2011 article describes Laura's national role in inspiring and creating postsecondary education for students with ID:

<https://masonlife.gmu.edu/video-life/life-video-laura>

George Mason University video of Laura taking the subway and going to work at her paid job at the World Bank:

<https://masonlife.gmu.edu/video-life/life-video-laura>

- See more at: <http://www.fairfaxmemorialfuneralhome.com/obituary/Laura-Jean-Elizabeth-Lee/Oakton-VA/1594078#obit-services> on Smith, Kung Sung Chen Lee; and Tom Sun Hun.

# Tribute Wall



“ *May god bless you always and god bless America*

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**Zach Fowler** - July 06, 2020 at 11:43 AM



“ *Hello Mr. & Mrs. Lee! My name is Nancy McClinch and I live in Fairfield CT. My daughter Catherine Ann, who also had Down Syndrome and a heart defect, died suddenly the morning of January 23rd in very much the same way as your beloved Laura. My heart goes out to you! I read the article online from the Washington Post and she was truly an amazing young lady! You must have been so proud of all that she had accomplished and that she was an inspiration to so many people!*

*Someday, maybe we can reach out to each other! My husband and I are truly having a tough time dealing with Catherine's loss. But she did have a beautiful life surrounded by a very large and loving family!*

*God bless you and give you strength in the days ahead!*

*Sincerely, Nancy and Terry McClinch & family*

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**Nancy G. McClinch** - March 21, 2016 at 02:08 PM