

Kathleen “Kay” Margaret Cleary Bennett

At a Glance:

Born: June 8, 1936, Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York

Died: August 4, 2022, Reno, Nevada

Maiden Name: Kathleen Margaret Cleary

Race/nationality/ethnic background: Irish

Married: Richard Najarian Sr. (1957- div. 1981),
Warren I. Anderson (1981- div.),
Hale Bennett (1987-2014),
James Manly (life partner 2016-2022)

Children: Richard, Thomas, John, Kathy, Matthew

Primary city and county of residence and work:
Carson City; Silver Springs, Lyon County

Major fields of work: Surgical nurse, Carson City
Supervisor, aviation

Other role identities: Tahoe Regional Planning Authority, mother



Kathleen M. Bennett
Photo courtesy James Manly

Dedicated nurse, public servant, turned aviatrix

Kay Bennett was a talented person dedicated to her commitments. This mother of five children went to nursing school to become a registered nurse. That career brought her to Nevada, where she became a Carson City Supervisor. With her husband Hale Bennett, Kay owned and operated the Silver Springs Airport.

Kathleen Margaret Cleary was born to John V. and Kathryn M. Cleary in Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York. According to her brother John, “as beautiful as she was, she was known to give a solid check to whoever crossed her. She frequently attributed her grit and tenacity to those formative years growing up in and around New York.”

In 1957 Kay married Richard Najarian, Sr. and they moved from New York to California. They raised their five children in Sunnyvale. When the youngest child entered first grade, Kay had the opportunity to join a reentry program at De Anza College in

Cupertino, Calif. She graduated with honors as a registered nurse. She became an operating room nurse so she could work during the day to be with her kids in the evenings.

On a skiing weekend at Lake Tahoe, Kay broke her leg and was sent to Lakeside Community Hospital in Incline Village, Nev. While there, the doctor treating her asked if she wanted a job with them. She spent close to three years working.

She heard of a job at the Carson Tahoe Hospital in Carson City as the manager of nursing, applied, and got the position. She managed nursing staff, physicians, hospital administration and patient care. While there she met Hale Bennett, who was chairman of the hospital board. She retired from nursing at that time. Kay and Hale were married in 1987.

An opening came up on the Carson City Board of Supervisors which she ran for and won in 1988. Kay was the first person to be elected in the primary, with 51.3% of the vote, meaning she did not need to participate in the general election. She represented Ward 4, in south Carson City for 12 years. She was only the second supervisor to sit on the board for three full terms.

A *Reno Gazette-Journal* article about Kay in 2020 stated, "During her tenure, Bennett sat on every board a supervisor could, except for the Carson City Convention and Visitors Bureau."

During her time as a supervisor Kay worked non-stop for Carson City. Kay told the Nevada Women's History Project in 2017, that one of the things she accomplished that she was particularly proud of was downtown development.

"The early, early stages of downtown redevelopment were something we did with no money. Not a dime. But we gathered the community around us, and an architect did a little bit here and someone else, it was like stone soup.

The fronts of the buildings in downtown needed desperately to be painted. So, an architect took on the job of doing all the colors. The senior class, senior high school class Carson High School challenged the junior class, and they took a building to paint and someone else took another building to paint. It was a great time. We did it. Anyway, that's downtown redevelopment and Main Street. I was very proud of that."

Following a substantial flood of the Carson River in 1997 the supervisors were working to mitigate the effects of future flooding. This was very complicated with many vested interests to satisfy. The Carson River Subconservancy District was in the formative legislative phase and Kay took this project on with gusto. She formed the Carson River Advisory Committee to provide a voice for all involved. "The point of that was to

hopefully create a green belt as from where the Carson River came into Carson City and out through Carson City into Dayton,” Kay said to NWHP.

“That was very, very controversial,” she said. “The private property owners were very threatened by that, because they felt I was going to come in and take (their land by the river) and they’d have bicycle paths in their backyards, and people were just going to be intruding on their privacy. They rose up in arms about it.” RGJ 2020

Kay also helped draft the legislation that created the Carson City Airport Authority. She sat on the Carson-Tahoe Hospital Board of Trustees for eight years, and she helped the city-owned hospital build the Minden Medical Center and fight to put residents on the board.

Kay was named a trustee to the American Hospital Association, a group charged with developing a five-state regional policy board and providing input on national health-care policy.

During this time the Virginia and Truckee Railroad was working to bring the V&T back to Carson City. Mayor Marv Teixeira and the Board were very engaged in that development. They “went through all kinds of hoops with NDOT” and finally got the overpass on Highway 50 that made the train route possible.

One of the really big items that Kay worked on was because she represented Carson City on the board of the Tahoe Regional Planning Authority. “I’m really very proud of the erosion control projects that were done on Highway 28 and still continue. I was part of the group of people who put together the presidential summit which is still going on.” NWHP Interview.



Photo from
Santa Cruz Sentinel,
August 31, 2016.

In 1997, she got to meet and work with President Bill Clinton and Vice-President Al Gore on that first presidential summit on Lake Tahoe. “That was quite an honor. And as a result of that there was a big federal appropriation for the natural resource, conservation natural resource erosion control at the lake.” NWHP Interview.

John Berkich, Carson City Manager at the time of Kay’s retirement from the Board of Supervisors, said in a 2020 *Reno Gazette-Journal* article, “Kay will always be remembered for her intense commitment to Carson City, to the region and to Nevada. She

took on some major issues on behalf of Carson City, at Lake Tahoe, and worked diligently at Carson-Tahoe, and she was very dedicated to health-care issues.”

Also honoring Kay on her retirement from the Board was fellow supervisor Pete Livermore who said, “I don’t know how in the world she has been able to keep anywhere near the pace she has for as many years as she has. The hospital board, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, the (Carson Water) Subconservancy District, Regional Transportation Commission – those are all high-time things. I don’t know how in the world she managed them all.”

What Kay did next was just as ambitious as her work as a supervisor. She and Hale had gone for a drive to Fallon so Kay could look at a redevelopment project there and, on the way, Hale stopped near Silver Springs and drove into a field. He asked Kay to look around and tell him what she saw.

“So, he’s bringing his car around and these big, big, big sagebrush and tall brush is going in and out and around these things and in and out around, and he finally gets to this big, big concrete pad, that was like 100 by 100 feet wide. He comes out, parks on it, and he said, “do you have any idea where you are?” And I said, “could this be an airport? Could this have been an airport?” And he said “yes, it sure is, and I landed a B-29 Superfortress on it, it’s called the Lahontan Flight Strip.” And I said, “really? No kidding.”

And so, we went back and there was another pad on the west end. I said “really?” Now, mind you I know enough to be dangerous. And I know about the interface of airports and residential, and residential encroachment is there, because I had fought a big deal in Carson City about this. I looked at this thing and I said, “Look at the approaches. There’s absolutely nothing here, no one here.” Da da da. I was so excited.”

Within two months they had purchased the assets of the Lahontan Airport Development Association. This was a complicated land ownership issue since the land belonged to the Bureau of Land Management. With years of work ahead of them, next began the process of getting the land transferred from the BLM to be the property of Lyon County. In 1992, the Bennetts negotiated a 50-year master lease agreement with Lyon County.

According to the History of the Airport on the Silver Springs Airport, LLC website, “the airstrip was built by the United States Army Air Force about 1942 and was



Hale and Kay Bennett at the Silver Springs Airport.

known as the Lahontan Airstrip. It was an emergency landing airfield for military aircraft on training flights.”

Kay loved flying with Hale and knew that she was not a “passenger in life” so she trained and received her pilot’s license. “Because I just thought it was an experience that is simply an absolute privilege to do so,” she told a NWHP interviewer. Kay joined the Reno High Sierra Chapter of The Ninety-Nines, an organization of women pilots.

Hale passed away in 2014, leaving a huge responsibility with Kay. In Hale Bennett’s obituary Kay said, “In the past year or so, as Hale battled multiple myeloma, which he’s had since 2005, I have taken over more duties and thus his death shouldn’t affect the airport operations. I’ll continue as the owner and CEO.”

A very important start was getting the airstrip on the National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems to obtain an FAA designation to enable FAA funds for improvement. Kay was ready with her skills in administration and her ability to work with government and people to accomplish tasks.

“That began a series of capital improvements almost every year. Working with the federal government, with Lyon County as the sponsor, we operated, managed and developed the airport. But the FAA funds for improvement had to come through a public sponsor, which was Lyon County and that was the public/private partnership. And that has worked well for 25 years.

Up to about now there's probably about six and a half million dollars in capital improvements that have been invested on that airport,” she said in a NWHP Interview.



In 2017, Kay was in discussion with potential partners to purchase the airport. With the development of the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center, the airport was in the right place at the right time as a potential hub for commercial and private air services to supplement the workings of the TRIC.

Kay did sell the airport and began the next phase of her life with Jim Manly, a decorated military aviation veteran and private plane owner. They planned to spend their lives seeing the country and visiting family.

Kay was diagnosed with brain cancer and died on August 4, 2022. Kay Bennett is inurned in a vault in Lone Mountain Cemetery in Carson City, Nev., beside Hale. Her marker contains a Triquetra or Trinity knot, symbolizing eternity.



There was a celebration of life for her at the Silver Springs Regional Airport on October 8, 2022. She was honored with a fly-over at that event.

Researched and written by Mona Reno.

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