

Obituaries

Artist Jessie Jane Lewis, 63, rights activist

Jessie Jane Lewis, 63, of Manayunk, a performance artist who helped win voting rights for disabled Philadelphians through a federal lawsuit, died of the effects of multiple sclerosis Saturday, Feb. 26, at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital.



- by By Walter F. Naedele, Inquirer Staff
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Jessie Jane Lewis, 63, of Manayunk, a performance artist who helped win voting rights for disabled Philadelphians through a federal lawsuit, died of the effects of multiple sclerosis Saturday, Feb. 26, at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital.

The 2003 settlement of the suit - filed in 2001 by the National Organization on Disability and nine disabled residents, including Ms. Lewis - laid out a three-year plan in which Philadelphia would make its voting machines and polling places more accessible to voters who are visually disabled or use wheelchairs.

The Inquirer report of the settlement stated that multiple sclerosis had forced Ms. Lewis to use a motorized scooter since 2000 and that she had to take her own ramp to her polling place.

The settlement required each of the city's 1,682 polling places to have at least one electronic voting machine equipped with earphones and audio instructions for blind

or visually impaired voters. And it set up a committee to evaluate the polling places not accessible to wheelchairs.

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Ms. Lewis told a reporter that she had cried when she learned of the settlement because "there was so much hurt and so much emotion that was built up."

Stephen F. Gold, who represented the plaintiffs, said in a phone interview Tuesday that "implementation is still going on."

"We're now up to 700 accessible polling places, at least," he said. "What we settled pretty quickly was the visual part. Now every polling precinct has one machine fully accessible to people who are blind. And every polling precinct has a machine that is adjustable [for] someone in a wheelchair."

The remaining difficulty is installing ramps at entrances or moving polling places to accessible sites.

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"It was an issue no one had ever thought about except Jessie," Gold said. "We really had begun to change that culture. We'll conclude that in the memory of Jessie."

Though she was the first to approach him about suing the city, Gold said, Ms. Lewis was not an outsider.

An opinion piece she wrote for The Inquirer in 2000, urging better access, identified her as chairperson of the Voter Accessibility Reform Initiative of the Mayor's Commission on People With Disabilities.

Born in Philadelphia, Ms. Lewis earned a bachelor's degree in photography at the former Philadelphia College of Art and graduated from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

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At the Woodmere Art Museum in Chestnut Hill, she was a member of the board of trustees from 1974 to 1978 and then an emerita trustee until 1982. A plaque at the

museum entrance identifies it as the Jessie Jane Lewis Foyer.

Though her later works were described as performance art, Ms. Lewis also had dealt with paint and canvas.

In 1982, Inquirer art critic Victoria Donohoe found that her pastels "reduce objects in nature to simple, organic-looking components that declare themselves as phenomena. This she accomplishes by establishing these chunky, faintly erotic shapes as large as her central design."

In 1983, Ms. Lewis was an actress in an installation, *Sophia's House*, at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Describing a performance about Adam and Eve in that installation, Inquirer art critic Edward J. Sozanski wrote, "Jessie Lewis was captivating as the serpent in the garden."

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In 1985, a video that she produced with Peter Rose was shown at the Whitney Biennial, a museum exhibition in

Manhattan. A year later it was among Biennial works presented by the Neighborhood Film/Video Project at the International House in West Philadelphia.

Several of her works were presented at the Nexus Foundation for Today's Art in Kensington, for which she had been president, her daughter Anya Rose said.

In 1994, Sozanski wrote that *BodyWorks*, at Nexus and the neighboring Clay Studio, was "a show of national scope that was conceived by artist Jessie Jane Lewis. . . . It's a major part of a monthlong, citywide examination of how artists cope with disabling illness."

The works had been chosen by no less than the curator of 20th-century art at the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

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Ms. Lewis also had a day job.

In a 1988 profile, Philadelphia Daily News reporter Dan Geringer called her "the woman who is pioneering the use of video therapy in Philadelphia-area nursing homes."

"Lewis has been a recreation therapist for 17 years, specializing in the elderly," he wrote. "Artistically, she is a video performance artist whose offbeat studies of subjects [range] from blindness to schizophrenia."

Ms. Lewis explained to the reporter why seeing themselves in her videos was so affecting.

"People don't remember where their room is. They don't remember who the president of the United States is.

"But," she said, "the feeling part doesn't leave them."

Besides her daughter, Ms. Lewis is survived by her husband, Bruce Tepper, and former husbands Robert Melito and Peter Rose.

A memorial service was set for 7 p.m. Saturday, May 14, at the Woodmere Art Museum, Germantown Avenue at Bells Mill Road.

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