

# Goodbye to Lace Vitunac, the woman who helped save the Savannas | Anthony Westbury

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(Photo: LEAH VOSS/TCPALM)

Breathe in the air, feel the silence. And thank Lace Vitunac we can still enjoy many of St. Lucie County's natural wonders.

Vitunac died — fittingly on Earth Day — April 22 at the age of 93.

She, along with her late husband, Walter, and five other kindred spirits, helped found the Conservation Alliance of St. Lucie County in 1972.

Convinced that Florida's birds and animals were suffering from a loss of natural habitat, Walter and Lace decided to act.



Lace Vitunac (Photo: CONTRIBUTED PHOTO FROM CHARLES VITUNAC)

Without the small group I refer to as the Magnificent Seven (only two of whom are still alive), we almost certainly would have condos towering over the Fort Pierce Inlet and the Savannas today.

The Vitunacs and friends began a dogged campaign to stop the march of the condos and eventually persuaded Florida's State Parks system to buy both pieces of land.

Lace Vitunac was soft-spoken and gentle, but inside that velvet exterior lurked a steely determination.

Current Conservation Alliance president Shari Anker laughingly noted "no one ever said no to Lace!"

After moving to St. Lucie County in 2011, Anker said she became close friends with the Vitunacs. They bonded closely over the group's ultimately unsuccessful fight to save the Halpatiokee Trails preserve on U.S. 1 in Port St. Lucie from becoming part of the route for the new Crosstown Parkway bridge.

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"Lace had such steel nerves," Anker said. "She had such a backbone. You always knew where she stood on an issue. She's the reason I'm with the Alliance today. She had me captivated with her unbelievable dedication, right up until the very end."



**A great egret takes flight Wednesday, October 14, 2009, above the basin marsh in the Savannas Preserve State Park in Port St. Lucie. Lace Vitunac, who died April 22 at age 93, was instrumental in saving the Savannas from residential development in the 1970s and persuading the state to make it a protected preserve. (Photo: ERIC HASERT/TCPALM)**

Anker said one of the last things Vitunac said was to inquire about the progress of ecologist Grant Gilmore's book.

Gilmore will speak at Vitunac's Celebration of Life service on Saturday.

"She was a very sweet lady who understood the deep, deep trouble we're in with the lagoon and our waterways," Gilmore said. "People don't realize what bad shape we're in. My book (which I've been working on for more than 20 years) lays it all out and Lace wanted to get the information out there."

Vitunac had not been in good health for some time. She'd suffered a massive stroke that robbed her of most of her eyesight.

She always wore enormous sunglasses to protect her eyes, as I recall.

Lace's son, Charles, formerly was attorney for Indian River County and the city of Vero Beach before retirement.

He said his mother first came to Florida in the 1920s when her father, a physician, came here for warmer weather to combat the effects of a gas attack during World War I.

Lace spent half the year in school here and half in Chicago until her father decamped to Texas in search of drier weather.

She graduated from the University of Texas in El Paso and became a reporter for the El Paso Herald-Post. On an assignment, she met former B-17 navigator Army Air Force Lt. Walter Vitunac, fresh back from the South Pacific.



**Joan Bausch, of Sewall's Point, a member of the Martin County chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society, examines a fern Friday, May 12, 2014, along the Halpatiokee Trails area in the Savannas Preserve State Park. Environmentalist Lace Vitunac, who died April 22, was instrumental in persuading the state to preserve this sensitive site. (Photo: ALEX SLITZ/TCPALM)**

They were married less than a year later in 1944. After stints in Germany, Japan and all over the U.S., the Vitunacs came to Florida when Walter was named commander of Cape Canaveral Air Force Base.

After his retirement in 1971, the family moved to Fort Pierce. His parents realized, Charles Vitunac said, there were few environmental protections in St. Lucie County at the time. They wrote a draft of the county's first tree ordinance at the dining-room table, Charles recalled.

He noted how undervalued the savannas were in the early 1970s. People mostly avoided the swamp, except to use it as a place to dump their trash.

One person who used her canoe to explore the Savannas was Carol Herzog, who was to become a fellow founder of the Conservation Alliance.

One day Herzog noticed a dragline clearing an island in the marshes. A developer had illegally constructed an earth causeway and was planning to build a golf course and 12-story condominiums, she later discovered.

So Herzog, the Vitunacs, John and Jane Brooks, Marjorie Silver Alder and Betty Lou Wells worked feverishly to stop the development.

"Lace was a very inspiring person," Herzog said. "She was very concerned with what we were losing."

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One very influential public servant who fell under Lace's and Walter's spell was Nathaniel Reed, assistant secretary to the Department of the Interior in the Nixon administration.

"I met her and Walter in the early 70s," Reed said, "and we had absolutely perfect chemistry. I fully encouraged their Conservation Alliance activities.

"When I left federal service in 1977, I served three terms on the South Florida Water Management District board and became heavily involved with them on water issues. We got along so well. There was always lots of laughter!"

Did he agree about Lace having a steely core?

"Oh yes! Titanium more like it!" Reed said.

Lace Vitunac inspired a new generation of environmentalists to follow in her footsteps. One was former Indian Riverkeeper Kevin Stinnette.

"We moved here in 1996 and she and Walt were so active, so passionate and had done so much to make St. Lucie County a wonderful place," Stinnette recalled.

"She was inspiring and I don't know that I would have become Riverkeeper without her encouragement."

Stinnette and others worry about today's and tomorrow's environmentalists stepping up to the plate.

"I don't know if people realize what an urgent need Lace and the others filled here. We've taken their contributions for granted," he said.

Lace Vitunac was one in a million and we are certain to miss her passion, guidance and foresight. I also hope future generations will fill be able to fill her shoes.

In the meantime, breathe in that fresh air, savor the silence and send a prayer of thanks to Lace.

*Anthony Westbury is a columnist for TCPalm. This column reflects his opinion. Contact him at 772-221-4220, [anthony.westbury@tcpalm.com](mailto:anthony.westbury@tcpalm.com), or follow him @TCPalmWestbury on Twitter.*

Fullscreen

## **Prescribed burn at Savannas Preserve State Park**

## **Services for Lace Vitunac**

A memorial service will be held May 12 at Yates Funeral Home, 7951 S. U.S. 1, Port St. Lucie, FL 34952

Visitation at 2:30 p.m. Service begins at 3 p.m.

The family requests that in lieu of flowers, donations be made to the Conservation Alliance of St. Lucie County at P.O. Box 12515, Fort Pierce, FL 34979-2515, or contribute online at [www.conservationallianceslc.org/donate.html](http://www.conservationallianceslc.org/donate.html).

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