

# Gretchen Wyler, 75; Broadway actress became animal activist

By Claire Noland, Times Staff Writer  
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Gretchen Wyler, an actress who left a successful Broadway musical career to dedicate her efforts to protecting animals and eventually became an outspoken critic of the Los Angeles Zoo, has died. She was 75.

Wyler died Sunday at her home in Camarillo after a long battle with breast cancer, her friend and fellow activist Catherine Doyle said.

Wayne Pacelle, president and chief executive of the Humane Society of the United States, praised her commitment as an animal rights advocate.

"She was a person of remarkable vigor and vision," Pacelle said Sunday. "And it's the loss of a major figure in the modern animal protection movement."

A singer, dancer and actress in such Broadway hits as "Guys and Dolls," "Silk Stockings," "Damn Yankees" and "Bye Bye Birdie," Wyler found a new passion in the late 1960s after visiting a dog pound near her home in Warwick, N.Y.

Appalled by the filthy, inhumane conditions she saw there, Wyler decided to take action: She quit eating meat, gave away her fur coats and opened a new animal shelter. She kept acting, but most of her time was spent educating the public about animal rights.

"Her idea," Pacelle said, "was never to preach to the choir but to broaden the message and try to reach mainstream America."

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals made her its first female board member in 1971 (though she was later dropped in a dispute with the board). She sat on the board of directors for the Fund for Animals and was vice chairwoman until 1991, when she founded the animal rights group the Ark Trust. In 2002 the Ark Trust merged with the Humane Society of the United States, and she served as vice president of the organization's Hollywood office until retiring last year.

Wyler also created the Genesis Awards, which since 1986 have recognized the media and entertainment industries for incorporating animal protection themes into their work. The films "Fast Food Nation," "Happy Feet" and "Charlotte's Web" were among the honorees at this year's event, which featured actor James Cromwell and comedian Bill Maher.

Working tirelessly on myriad animal rights issues, Wyler aimed to shut down horse-slaughtering factories, end the use of steel-jaw leg hole traps, prohibit the use of animal testing in research and development, and improve the treatment of animals in zoos and circuses — anything that reflected her motto: "Animals should have the right to run if they have legs, swim if they have fins and fly if they have wings."

Her passionate views sometimes ruffled the feathers of Los Angeles Zoo officials, whom she criticized from her position on the L.A. Zoo directors advisory committee.

"Her heart's in the right place, but she doesn't really know the animals' biology," Manuel Mollinedo, who was zoo director from 1995 to 2002, said last year. "She tends to look at animals more from an emotional perspective."

She had come a long way from Oklahoma City, where she was born Gretchen Patricia Wienecke on Feb. 16, 1932. A dancer, she made her professional debut in St. Louis in 1950 in a ballet ensemble.

When she landed a spot in the chorus of "Where's Charley?" in 1951, she met Ray Bolger, the Scarecrow in "The Wizard of Oz," who encouraged her to change her last name to Wyler.

She performed in eight Broadway productions, including "Sly Fox" with George C. Scott.

She moved to Los Angeles along with a traveling production of that show in 1979 and never left, adding TV, stage and minor film roles to her increasingly busy animal activism.

One of Wyler's last crusades was on behalf of Ruby, the L.A. Zoo's female African elephant. Wyler was an outspoken critic of the zoo's decision four years ago to move Ruby to Knoxville, Tenn. She was one of the first voices in the city to claim that Ruby's move was inhumane because female elephants are social creatures in the wild and the move would sever Ruby's longtime connection with one of the zoo's other female elephants, Gita.

Ruby was returned to the L.A. Zoo in 2004, and Wyler took up lobbying the zoo to move her to an elephant sanctuary.

Two weeks ago, nearly a year after Gita died, the zoo moved Ruby to a sanctuary in San Andreas, Calif. Wyler "lived to know that Ruby was being moved to a sanctuary," said Sue Blackmore of the Humane Society's Hollywood office.

Wyler, who was divorced with no children, is survived by a sister, Peggy Hanson of Pacific Palisades, and a brother, Lou Wienecke of Granbary, Texas. Services are pending.

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